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FROLIC WIND

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by
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The frolic wind that breathes the spring,
Zephyr, with Aurora playing. . . .

JOHN MILTON

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CHAPTER I

Miss Jewell came slowly along the terrace and turned in at the wide doors of the big drawing-room. Then she turned and looked back at the cluster of basket chairs under the dark, spreading cedar.

The after-lunch talk was breaking up, and Lady Athaliah was already stumping away towards her tower. She waved her black cane vindictively at an inoffensive pea-hen as she passed. The original pair of birds had been given to her father by the Prince Regent on the occasion of his memorable visit to Pagnell Bois ; the First Gentleman in Europe had considered the gift of a flaunting peacock and his demure mate fitting compensation for an excellent practical joke he had committed on the late Lord Rakeshame's person ; which was to call the attention of that amiable and portly nobleman to some distant object, and then, with a dexterous shove, to precipitate him into the green, viscous slime of the water-lily pond at the bottom of the sloping lawn.

Lady Athaliah had never liked the peacocks, but none of her sisters would consent to their removal. They stood for something. They represented one

of the glories of Pagnell Bois, just as the framed and witty "bread-and-butter" letter from Sydney Smith that hung in the hall, and the sketch made by Thackeray (it had been considered a desecration at the time) on the panelling of the third guest-room, and the snuff-box left by Henry, third Earl Bathurst (he who cut off his pigtail at the passing of the Reform Bill, saying : "Ichabod, for the glory is departed ") were other and as striking glories.

Miss Jewell sighed gently. In a minute or two she must go into the big, shadowy room and arrange Lady Cleone's patience cards for the evening. Lady Cleone liked to have her pack set in order, not in such a way that the game came out without any difficulty, but so that, with a little manipulation and ingenuity, she could get it out. Lady Cleone had, as Lady Damaris put it, ideas ; or, as Lady Bernice said : " Poor Cleone has never got over—" and then stopped abruptly, and crossed herself ; or, as Miss Jewell considered, as not quite right in the head.

It was intolerable to Miss Jewell, this daily task. Lady Cleone played " Senior Wrangler," and poor Miss Jewell racked her brains every afternoon over the arrangement of the cards. Although she must have performed this labour almost day by day for years, she had never arrived at the conception of a definite plan of campaign. Every day she sat down

at the little table plastered with gold scrolls (once the property of the Empress Josephine), and laid out the cards—two queer old packs, bearing, on the court cards, legends in Portuguese, which Miss Jewell did not understand—and laid and re-laid them until at last she had coaxed the piles of twelve into such an order that the triumphal end of eight kings could be reached.

She stood for a little looking at the rapidly dispersing group under the cedar. Lady Damaris Mocque-Stallyon was shepherding Mr. Roxborough and Miss Vulliamy in the direction of the pond, or, as she would say, the lake. Miss Jewell watched them cross the rustic bridge, and pause on its crest, while Lady Damaris, according to her habit, indicated the inscription carved by one of the exiled Orléans princes (Miss Jewell could never remember which) on the balustrade : “ Plus faict douceur que violenz.” Mr. Roxborough bent over it, and made some remark to Lady Damaris, with a little, futile gesture of his long, thin hands. Miss Vulliamy did not seem to be interested. She stood there looking politely at the inscription, but obviously not paying the least attention. Miss Jewell thought she must be about thirty-eight, but then, with a vague idea of charity, reduced the result of her computations to thirty-four. She had under her arm a brilliant blue book, just

the colour of the southern sky ; it clashed agreeably with her mustard-coloured dress.

Lady Damaris and her little party proceeded over the bridge and disappeared round the corner, where the orange lilies soared from the rockery like tall plumes. She would take them, thought Miss Jewell, to the shady side of the famous rose-garden, and sit on one of the wide, curved, white seats. Each seat had on it a motto ; when they were first placed in the garden, each illustrious guest had been asked to select an apt quotation, until the seats were filled. An extra one had been added for Oscar Wilde. Miss Jewell could only recall one :

Fuhle was dies Herz empfindet,
Reiche frei mir deine Hand,
Und das Band, das uns verbindet,
Sei kein schwaches Rosenband.

She remembered reading it in the schoolroom ; Goethe, that was it. It had been the choice of one of the Hohenlohes. Lady Damaris always said that the most suitable motto for him would have been : “ Ich denke einen langen Schlaf zu tun ” ; “ for that,” she would sigh, “ was all he thought about in our dear rose-garden.”

Under the cedar, General Tresmand and Mrs. Murat-Blood were settling down for their afternoon

siesta—the general behind the outspread pages of *The Times*, and his companion entrenched within a rampart of various sociological works, two note-books, and many typewritten documents. The late Major Murat-Blood, who had died gloriously on the Menin Road, had obtained the former half of his patronymic from an early peccadillo of the great Joachim, in partnership with the daughter of an exiled Irishman. His name, and that of his comrade Bonaparte, had been reviled, until such time as fortune and the Emperor Napoleon set Murat on the throne of Naples, when Miss Blood's offspring had instantly assumed his surname, which, ever since, his descendants had borne with a portentous mixture of pride and humility.

Lady Bernice and Princess Rosencrantz-Guildenstern were coming along the terrace. Miss Jewell watched them as they came. Lady Bernice wore a long, clinging dress of an indeterminate shade of mauvish-blue, which fell in muddled, ungracious folds. She had an immense gold cross hung round her neck. The princess was in black, as shiny as her shoes and eyes. Her plucked eyebrows were irregular, the left arched higher than the right. Her loud, clear voice somehow had a quality of shine too.

"Ma chère Bérénice," she was saying (she belonged, of course, to the French line of the

Rosencrantzes), "how can you doubt it? A manumitted slave has no place in the world. What are the workers, the persons who sweat in factories, but manumitted slaves? They are given nominal power, which they can only finally exercise for their own benefit by the additional persuasion of force. We have no interest in them. When they were serfs we had. We were naturally unwilling to let our property deteriorate. Every owner became a statesman. One day we shall return to slavery. What is freedom but release from responsibility? Who, then, is freer than the slave? What usage gives to the majority a greater freedom than slavery?"

On her hobby-horse again, thought Miss Jewell.

Lady Bernice sucked her breath in between her teeth, and shook her head.

"Oh, but, *Athénée*, it is contrary to the law of God. Terrible," she said. "Oh, Cecilia, you might see that the bridge-tables are put out this evening, and that the markers are in order. No, *Athénée*, it is unthinkable. How can you countenance it? . . ."

"Yes, yes, certainly," breathed Miss Jewell, and flattened herself against the heavy, velvet curtain as they passed into the drawing-room. The princess's voice rose again, masterful, as indomitable as a gramophone. Miss Jewell hardly listened.

"The greatest good of the greatest number, . . .

That is our burden, responsibility. . . . Villeinage. . . . What did you say was vile? Well, the infusion of new blood. . . . The droit de seigneur. . . .”

The two passed out of the room, and a great silence fell. For a moment Miss Jewell listened to the bourdon of the bees and the incessant buzz of a blue-bottle against the window, and snuffed the scented summer air up her ladylike nostrils.

Then she turned and crossed the great ocean of polished floor to the island of carpet, which seemed so small in the huge room, but which, as the house-keeper would say on show days, was “one large seamless Aubusson,” and took the two packs of cards out of the drawer in the Empress Josephine table.

She selected one to eight of diamonds, and set them in a row. Then she applied herself to the awful problem of arranging the packs in the bottom row so that Lady Cleone could get the game out that evening. She hated “Senior Wrangler.” There was so much calculation involved in it. She never remembered that a queen required a card whose pips numbered one less than those of the card above, and always had to count under her breath: “Queen and six are eighteen. Thirteen from eighteen is five.”

For a time she sat at her task, and her whispering mingled with the sounds from the garden and stole

about the big, dim room. When she glanced up to achieve some complicated calculation, her eyes fell on the big Carolus Durand portrait of Lady Damaris Mocque-Stallyon. She was portrayed in a fluffy, white dress against the background of a hot, red curtain. That, of course, was in the lifetime of Sir Beauvoir Mocque-Stallyon, who had governed various insignificant parts of the Empire for many years.

Miss Jewell could not fix her attention on the cards. She kept on doing the silliest things. She felt somehow young and gay this afternoon, as though she wanted to escape into the wide gardens, like the bees and the butterflies, and flutter from flower to flower. She had a most odd vision of herself, flitting about the shrubberies and thickets, endeavouring to emulate the butterflies, and only succeeding in looking incredibly ungainly. She laughed gently to herself.

Her laugh was cut short by an incisive voice speaking on the terrace.

“Cissie !”

That must be Lady Athaliah. No one else called her Cissie. She turned to see the tall, bent figure silhouetted against the brilliant gardens. As Miss Jewell looked at her she was all in shadow, except for the glint of her sunken eyes, which looked always upwards.

“Cissie, please go and see if there is anything for me by the second post.”

Miss Jewell went out of the room, taking the short cut through the two other drawing-rooms, now shut and shrouded, but which could be opened wide one to another and to the outer room, to form one long suite to the hall. She was always rather frightened of Lady Athaliah, who lived alone in her tower, usually appearing only at meals. An aged crone came up from the village daily to clean for her, but otherwise no one was allowed inside except at Lady Athaliah's invitation.

On the great console under the eagle-crested mirror lay a pile of letters. Miss Jewell went through them slowly. Mrs. Murat-Blood, Lady Damaris (three for her), Mr. Roxborough, Lady Bernice (two, and a postcard from Rome), the princess (a grey envelope with an enormous closed crown on the flap), another for Mrs. Murat-Blood, and at last two for Lady Athaliah.

One was a thick package of periodicals circled with a band of paper, covered with German stamps, presenting images of Frederick the Great and Schiller, and addressed in crabbed writing to the Hochwohlgeborene Lady Athaliah Jeune. Miss Jewell tried to peep inside and read the titles of the magazines ; but, just as she found she could not, her

conscience called to her, saying that it was not a nice thing to do.

Miss Jewell returned to the drawing-room and found Lady Athaliah standing just where she had left her, leaning on her ebony cane, with her eyes fixed with concentration on nothing in particular, unless, indeed, she were contemplating thus earnestly an etching by Félicien Rops, which depicted a lady of unpleasant proportions, clad only in her garters, scratching herself under the arm, and playing with a monkey, who was imitating her homely gesture. It had been sent to Lady Damaris by an American millionaire, whose name no one could remember, in memory of his visit to Pagnell Bois.

Lady Athaliah accepted her letters with a sharp nod and turned back to the terrace. Miss Jewell heard her cane clack-clacking over the flags and the slam of the tower door.

She tried to return to the arrangement of Lady Cleone's cards.

"Nine and three are twelve. That needs a queen. Queen and three are fifteen. Two wanted," she murmured to herself. She seemed to be able to watch her hands, as though they were the hands of somebody else, as they moved here and there among the cards. Nice hands they were, too. Her best feature, Lady Damaris said.

“Don’t mind having a big nose, my dear Cecily,” she would say. “Don’t try and hide it. Stick it out. It is at any rate dignified. But remember never to hide your hands. When they are still they are like lilies, and when they move they are birds.”

This comforted Miss Jewell ; although, to be sure, the last sentence was indubitably a quotation from someone, doubtless illustrious and probably Pre-Raphaelite. But nevertheless she had long ago come to the conclusion that she was irretrievably plain. Not even ugly ; if you were ugly you could hope to have at any rate some effect ; not even ugly plain ; just plain plain. And Lady Damaris was almost the only person who had ever seemed to think that there was anything to be done with her appearance.

She wondered idly whether she would always retain her beautiful hands. Perhaps they would become big-knuckled and grotesque, like Lady Bernice’s, which resembled twigs in a Rackham drawing. Youth and her hands were all she had. Youth ? Well, twenty-seven was young—positive childhood, in fact, in this house, whose youngest inhabitant was Lady Cleone, who was close on seventy. It seemed impossible to do much with that amount of youth and beautiful hands. She supposed she would just go on living here with the four sisters,

arranging cards for Lady Cleone, embroidering monograms on Lady Damaris's handkerchiefs, running errands for Lady Athaliah, and going to church with Lady Bernice, who, though she would not quite go over to Rome, worshipped on such exalted peaks of Protestantism that it seemed mere prevarication on her part not to let herself be wafted on an incense cloud to the steps of the papal throne, and indulged in genuflections of every variety and rosaries of every possible material.

With an effort Miss Jewell restored her attention to the cards. To-day it was even harder than usual. Her thoughts would stray on the uplands of possibility, instead of plodding over the plains of fact.

Suddenly someone spoke quite close to her. She had been absorbed, but not in her task. Her conscience pricked her. She did not notice what had been said, but looked up to see Mr. Charlecote standing beside her. It was funny that she had hardly spoken to him, although he had arrived the day before. Besides herself and Miss Vulliamy, he was the only person in the house who was on the cisalpine side of middle age, as Mr. Roxborough would have put it.

Mr. Charlecote repeated his remark.

"Lady Damaris has just been paying me a compliment."

He always made remarks out of the blue like that, without any particular reason or aim. Having launched this statement in his rather tired voice, he transferred his blue-grey stare from Miss Jewell to the cards, and remained silent. Miss Jewell looked him up and down. She felt she ought to say something, but had no idea what.

“Or at least,” went on Mr. Charlecote, “I think it was meant to be a compliment. She told me that Orpen was here last week-end and Lavery is coming next. I took it to imply that I completed this trinity of art.”

He paused, but Miss Jewell offered no comment.

“She tried to drag me off to the rose-garden with the Vulliamy and that old gentleman with hairs in his ears. Roxborough, is his name? Then she began to relate how Rochester and Sedley came to Pagnell Bois, and I fled.”

Miss Jewell continued to look at him. He was, she thought, really very young. He had, of course, painted one or two pictures, which had received much attention, and had been the cause of much bitter controversy, just as Miss Vulliamy had written one or two obscure and extraordinary books. Otherwise neither would have been at Pagnell Bois. Ever since Miss Jewell could remember, she had done

nothing but meet interesting people. People who did things, who wrote things, who painted things, who composed things, who said things ; leaders of men ; prophets of progress ; preservers and destroyers ; the " world-losers and world-forsakers." No one came to Pagnell Bois who was not an expert in something. Mr. Roxborough was there, even, chiefly because he was an authority (how Miss Jewell had come to dread the word !) on half a dozen things : mostly he specialised in what Miss Jewell was prone to lump under the heading bric-à-brac. Only just before luncheon he had been disputing with Lady Damaris about a porcelain snuff-box. He said it was Sèvres, while Lady Damaris affirmed it to be an English ware. It had, of course, been given to her father by Lady Holland. Nothing in Pagnell Bois seemed to have been bought. The very lands had been given to Sir Edward Jeune when Tunstal Abbey was confiscated and disestablished by Thomas Cromwell and Harry Tudor. General Tresmand's claim to be a visitor at this temple of fame was more obscure. He had been heavily censured recently for firing on a native crowd, which, led by a few extremists, was demonstrating in front of his barracks. He had been invited by Lady Damaris, who, as the widow of a colonial governor of the old order, objected to all natives on principle. Mrs. Murat-Blood

had been in the van of all women's movements ; before the war she had been carried off under the arm of a policeman in Parliament Square, after having broken a window in the Local Government Board with a four-pound hammer. Now, of course, she was a leading light of the National Council of Women, and had refused the D.B.E. Whenever her name was mentioned, it was added that she was on thirty-three committees.

Miss Jewell continued to look at Mr. Charlecote, who continued to look at the cards. He was rather tall and thin, and dressed in a double-breasted suit of grey flannel. He had a habit of running his fingers through his dark, wavy hair, so that it was never really tidy.

" You seem to have a silly sort of position in this house," he said at last.

Miss Jewell considered.

" I try to make myself useful," she said.

" Why ? "

Miss Jewell hesitated, and tried to meet the level gaze of Mr. Charlecote's eyes. They were transparent and bright ; you seemed to be able to see a very long way into them.

" Well, you see, my mother was a sort of cousin of the Jeunes, and she died when I was a baby, so they gave me a home."

"D'you mean to say you've been here all your life? H e r e ?"

"Certainly. Don't you like Pagnell Bois, Mr. Charlecote? Most people would think it a privilege."

"D'you consider it a privilege?"

"Of course I do," said Miss Jewell stoutly.

"An expensive privilege?"

Miss Jewell frowned. But she found it impossible to frown at Mr. Charlecote when he smiled like that.

"Well, perhaps a little," she sighed.

"Are you happy?" Mr. Charlecote still smiled at her.

Miss Jewell had a feeling that she was being pursued. She felt that she was being chased into a corner, and would have to turn and face something. She was afraid that Mr. Charlecote would ask her questions that she had never really asked herself. She hedged.

"I am very grateful to my cousins for giving me a home. And even if it is an . . . expensive privilege to live at Pagnell Bois, there are great compensations. One meets such interesting people. Really I am very lucky."

That was a quotation. From Lady Damaris. It was inspired by her loyalty and gratitude. "Nonsense," said something in Miss Jewell's mind, "nothing of the sort. Loyalty and gratitude, indeed!" Miss

Jewell felt afraid again. With her, all ideas were instantly translated into feelings.

Mr. Charlecote made a sound of scorn.

"Nonsense," he said, almost at the same moment as the something in Miss Jewell's mind said it. "I don't believe you're lucky at all. I think you're thoroughly wretched. . . ."

"Oh, no," said Miss Jewell.

"Thoroughly wretched," he repeated. "Only you don't know it. Half the wretched people in the world don't know they're wretched. They think they're happy but dull, or sad but brave, or stupid but pains-taking. Why shouldn't the Jeunes give you a home? I'm sure you earn it. You're always doing the most senseless things for them. Things an intelligent child of ten could do. And what have they ever done for anyone? They live here, wrapped and cosseted in comfort, picking people's brains. Hasn't it occurred to you that that's all they do? Before I came here I had always heard of Lady Damaris and her sisters as legendary figures. They were mentioned with bated breath. 'Great Englishwomen.' Or 'the most wonderful old ladies.' And then I come here, and see them. Lady Cleone's an imbecile . . ."

"Oh, no, Mr. Charlecote," said Miss Jewell, "only a little weak in the head. I think she had a great shock."

“ And Lady Athaliah lives in a tower and behaves like a mannerless sorceress. And Lady Damaris tells you what she considers the good remarks of all the people who have been here before, and the histories of all the furniture ; and Lady Bernice’s a religious maniac.”

“ Of course, she is very devout,” said Miss Jewell.

“ And what have they done ? Oh, I know Lady Athaliah painted once. Lady Damaris showed me one of her pictures. Interest of one artist in another, and so on, you know. An incredible affair with nice flat flesh-tones and a superabundance of modelling. A certain dexterity with her whites though, I must say. But what else ? They have lived for an abnormally long time, and known an abnormal number of people, whose brains they have picked. They are proud of keeping up with the times, so they go on picking people’s brains. Their father was a rake, who also lived an abnormally long time, and their mother plied the same trade as they. How old is Lady Damaris ? She’s the eldest, isn’t she ? ”

Miss Jewell seized on this concrete question.

“ No, Lady Athaliah is the eldest. She is eighty-six. And Lady Cleone, the youngest, is close on seventy. Lord Rakeshame, you know, was seventy when Lady Athaliah was born. He was born in 1771, and was married three times . . . ”

"Oh, don't," said Mr. Charlecote. Miss Jewell was surprised. So many people asked her these questions about the Jeunes, and she had learnt her part.

"For goodness' sake, don't," he said again. "Lady Damaris is the only guide you want in this house. But what do they matter, anyhow? They can't help it. They were brought up to remember who took them on his knee, and who danced with them at childish parties, so that one day they might say: 'Ah, yes, I remember dancing with the ninth Lord Huntly, who had danced with Marie Antoinette,' or some such nonsense."

Mr. Charlecote paused and lit a cigarette.

"What's that you're doing now?"

Miss Jewell explained.

"Good Lord, d'you mean to say you have to spend a glorious afternoon like this, when the very stones on the terrace are basking in the sun, arranging cards so that an old imbecile tyrant like Lady Cleone . . ."

"Mr. Charlecote!"

"Offended? Tell me now, truly, isn't Lady Cleone a tyrant? Aren't they all tyrants?"

Miss Jewell hesitated.

"Yes," she said, with sudden determination, "they are, but they were brought up to be tyrants."

"And isn't Lady Cleone an imbecile? Oh, I

know it's very sad, and one is very sorry for her, and it isn't her fault, and . . . Oh, good Lord ! ”

“ It's a harmless foible, Mr. Charlecote. Conceivably, when you are seventy, you will have some foibles of your own.” Miss Jewell felt that she had struck a blow, as in honour bound, for her patrons. She glowed.

“ Foibles be damned ! I hope I shan't keep anyone as young as you indoors on a summer day sorting idiotic patience cards.”

Miss Jewell's glow vanished.

Mr. Charlecote looked quite annoyed. He sat down on a ridiculously small chair and began to arrange the cards for her. He seemed to have no difficulty at all. Miraculously, he worked the game out backwards, starting at the end with eight kings, and setting the cards as they would have to come. Miss Jewell watched him, fascinated. Such dexterity amazed her.

Came a long silence while Mr. Charlecote flipped the cards here and there. At last he finished, and flicked the last card into place. Then he spread out his hands, with a mocking showman's gesture, and smiled at her.

“ Voilà ! What's your name ? ” he said.

“ My name ? Cecilia.”

“ Cecilia. Yes, and Lady Damaris calls you Cecily,

and Lady Athaliah, Cissie, and the princess, Cécile. Haven't you another name? A real name, I mean, that you think of as your own, that you attach to yourself when you see yourself beautiful and fêted. When you imagine all the things that you would hate so much if they really happened."

Miss Jewell seldom did any of these things.

"I have another name," she said, "an Irish name. Rather an odd name. No one has ever called me by it."

"Tell me. I shall call you by it."

"Dympna."

"Dympna. Of all the marvellous names! It's perfect. My dear Dympna, here have you been Cecilia all your life, and you have a glorious name like Dympna lurking round the corner. Dympna!"

"Cecilia isn't a bad name, Mr. Charlecote..."

"Alexis."

Miss Jewell disregarded this.

"I think Lady Bernice was very fond of music at the time, and she was my godmother, you know."

Mr. Charlecote groaned, and intoned gently:

"At last divine Cecilia came, Inventress of the vocal frame."

He ran his fingers through his hair and destroyed the parting.

"But that's it," he cried. "Now I've got it. I was

wondering where on earth I'd heard the name Dympna before. You remember the Flemish pictures at Burlington House? The funny little series of pictures of the life of Saint Dympna? She was an Irish princess. After her mother's death her father proposed marriage to her. The princess, 'appalled,' as the catalogue said, fled to Antwerp. There was a picture of her on the shore, being appalled, in a pink dress (she always wore the pink dress, it seems), and across a sort of duck-pond the city of Antwerp. She died, and her body was lost, and years afterwards found again and buried with due honour. Of course, by then her unusual chastity had earned her canonisation. Saint Dympna. Did you see her?"

Miss Jewell shook her head. What a lot of enthusiasm Mr. Charlecote had.

"No, I didn't go to Burlington House. But I remember someone who was down here for the week-end (was it Lady Chamberlain?) told us all about it. But I don't think she mentioned Saint Dympna. I didn't know there was one."

Mr. Charlecote extinguished his cigarette in an onyx bowl with a vicious jab.

"Of course. No one in this house goes anywhere or does anything. You just talk to people who have been and have done"

"Lady Damaris took me to the Lido last summer.

And she has often told me that it is very educational to live here. She says that to have talked to an expert of every subject is better than to do anything yourself. That it is better to know something of everything than everything of something."

"That's all very well for Lady Damaris. How like her to have the nerve to fling clichés all over the place like that. The worst part of it is that when she says them, they don't sound like clichés. Dympna, you are adorable."

He smiled at her in such a lively manner that Miss Jewell rose to her feet.

"I must go up and change now, Mr. Charlecote," she said. "Thank you for arranging the cards for me."

Mr. Charlecote crossed the room and stood gazing at a marble bust perched on the corner of a cabinet. The Younger Pitt, Miss Jewell remembered; Lord Rakeshame had known him.

"I shall get fat," said Mr. Charlecote, out of the blue. Miss Jewell hesitated by the card-table, patting the deck nervously, and without object.

"I think," said Mr. Charlecote, with the air of one who has pondered a problem deeply and with care, "I think that of all the people in this house, you are the only one who is remotely or at all interesting."

Miss Jewell looked across the room at his back. A latent sense of humour soared in her. She, interesting !

"You will be telling me that I am beautiful and fêted next, Mr. Charlecote," she said.

The next moment she regretted it. Fishing ; in shallow waters, she hoped.

Mr. Charlecote swung round.

"Beautiful ? " he cried. He seemed quite annoyed. "Beautiful ? Of course you're not beautiful. You're strange, grotesque, odd if you like. But unique. Beautiful ! Fancy wanting to be beautiful, with your appearance. Can't you see that with that flaming hair and those heavy black eyebrows, and your pale, silvery eyes, you're far more wonderful to look at than half the lovely women on earth ? And your hands . . ."

(So he had noticed her hands, thought Miss Jewell.)

"You have the appeal of the unusual, of the slightly pathetic. Just the appeal of the little *Infantas* of Velazquez. You ought to wear clothes to go with it. Odd, stiff clothes. . . . That's absurd, of course. That's the painter and not the man talking. I should hate you in odd clothes."

He came back to her on the island of carpet, and took her hands. Miss Jewell let him have them. She

felt that they were both behaving rather strangely, but it was exciting. Her hands were limp ; his felt hot and dry.

“Dympna, don’t ever try and change yourself. Plastic surgery, and things.”

Miss Jewell had thought of plastic surgery as something that German movie stars went in for, and no one else. Of course, they said that the princess had been to Josef in Berlin, but even that was different.

“There are people who would like to chip bits off your long, thin nose, and pluck your eyebrows, and cover your cheeks with paint.”

Mr. Charlecote withdrew a little way and surveyed her. He did not release her hands.

“You d o want a little colour,” he said, “just a little, from your cheek up towards your ears.”

(Of course, he was a painter, thought Miss Jewell.)

“And you want a perfume. Something very faint and simple. Like the smell of an orange stuck with cloves.”

He dropped her hands almost roughly.

“Sorting cards for Lady Cleone !” he exclaimed. The disgust in his tone made Miss Jewell blush. She felt somehow responsible.

“I must really go and change now, Mr.

Charlecote," she said, feeling slightly flustered and that she must get away.

"Alexis," he said absently, and made no effort to restrain her. "Good-bye, Dympna."

She turned at the door and saw him staring blankly at the etching of Félicien Rops which had engaged the attention of Lady Athaliah so recently.

She walked down the long corridor to the hall. As she passed the eagle-crested mirror, she paused for a moment and looked at her reflection, sticking out her nose, as Lady Damaris had told her to. It seemed to be enormous, and she jerked back her chin instinctively. Red hair, too, she thought, rather badly shingled. But her eyebrows were black. By nature.

CHAPTER II

Lady Damaris Mocque-Stallyon shepherded Mr. Roxborough and Miss Vulliamy across the rustic bridge and down the long, narrow path between great clumps of delphinium and iris and antirrhinum to the rose-garden.

Mr. Roxborough hummed a little air to himself as he went. He held one arm bent, the hand drooping, the fingers hanging singly, a little stiffly. He waved them from time to time at a flower or a butterfly, as though to indicate that he had observed its existence, which was thereby justified. He wore a black silk tie through a gold ring. Miss Vulliamy walked with long, clumsy strides, her mustard-coloured linen frock making harsh, crackling noises as she moved. Lady Damaris swept ahead, her long dress of patterned *crêpe-de-Chine* in green and black and pink brushing pollen from the overhanging blooms. At the bend of the path, where the entrance to the rose-garden was, she stopped automatically, out of habit, to give her guests the opportunity for exclamations of wonder and appreciation. Mr. Roxborough, she knew, would not disappoint her.

"My dear lady! Every time I come here the rose-garden is more superb. It never ceases to astonish me. There are no words . . ."

After a suitable pause for marvelling, he endeavoured to disprove his latter statement.

"So many rose-gardens are a riot. 'A rain and ruin of roses over the rose-red land.'"

Lady Damaris signified by an inclination of her head and a little clucking noise her recognition of the quotation. Mr. Roxburgh continued :

"But here you have achieved the . . . I was about to say, the impossible. You have a wealth of blossom, a glory of colour, a profusion of scents and tints and forms. But you have not lost design. There is, for all the almost tropic luxuriance of bloom, a certain . . . what shall I say ? . . . elegance, delicacy, daintiness? Something that savours . . ." (should he have said "has a flavour of"? No ; "savours" was better) ". . . savours of the eighteenth century. Something that has the purpose of Lenôtre, the feeling that everything is voulu, the exquisite balance of Fragonard and Watteau, and yet the casual accomplishment . . ." (Mr. Roxborough pronounced the second syllable of this word to rhyme with hump) ". . . of design, which is so inalterably English. Nowhere but in England could this have been created. In France, nature would

have been equally bridled and directed, but one would always have been conscious of the leash. Here, the reins have been held with a light hand. Nature is neither muzzled nor allowed to run amok."

Unlike those metaphors, thought Miss Vulliamy grimly.

"See that outstanding branch of . . . Étoile de Hollande, is it not? It breaks the general line of the bush, yet it is not wrong. It does not destroy the conventionality of the design, but it introduces vitality.

"Vitality," he repeated. Miss Vulliamy had an idea that he repeated his last words when he was in labour of a phrase, to give himself time and to forbid interruption. Mr. Roxborough was presently delivered.

"Here," he perorated, "we have nature debarred from caprice, but not devitalised."

He spread his thin, agile hands and sketched a gesture which conferred upon the rose-garden and its generations of creators the accolade of his appreciation and approval.

"It has been very much admired," murmured Lady Damaris. "I recollect Lord Beaconsfield standing just where you are now, and praising it in similar terms. Of course, he was an unscrupulous flatterer."

By a glance at the path and a deprecatory gesture of his acrobatic hands, Mr. Roxborough signified his consciousness of the fact that he was on holy land, where many greater than he had stood and poured out their meed of praise ; while at the same time denying the implication contained in Lady Damaris's last words. Not even the suspicious Miss Vulliamy guessed, and it is doubtful whether they themselves realised, that year by year, on that same hallowed spot, they had recited to each other those same speeches, Lady Damaris instancing, indeed, now Lord Salisbury and now Anna, Duchesse de Mouchy, Mr. Roxborough faithful to the eighteenth century. He considered that his outlook savoured rather of that exquisite period.

Miss Vulliamy was heard to murmur :

"Superb. Like the palette of an artist who has been painting a sunset."

Cliché, thought Lady Damaris ; why couldn't the girl say something original ?

The company passed into the garden.

Lady Damaris led the way to the seat on the shady side, labelled :

Rosy is the West,
Rosy is the South,
Roses are her cheeks,
And a rose her mouth.

Miss Vulliamy did not think it had much point. She snuffed the scent of a great Ulrich Brunner that nodded over the seat, thrusting her sharp nose deep into its corolla. Mr. Roxborough suddenly realised that she reminded him of a terrier.

He perused the inscription, and said softly :

“ All night the roses have heard
The flute, violin, bassoon.”

He did this, not because it had any bearing on events or conversation, but as a roundabout way of showing that he had placed the lines.

Lady Damaris said :

“ Lord Tennyson frequently came here. When he stayed at Pagnell Bois the rose-garden was sacred to him. Nobody was allowed to enter or disturb him here, any more than they were when he was out walking. He wrote a charming verse about it in the visitors’ book on his first visit. But it was too long to carve on a seat, and was all one sentence.”

Mr. Roxborough nodded, and stroked the side of his nose with his forefinger. Miss Vulliamy decided to examine the thick, leather-bound visitors’ book in some detail. When her turn came, she wanted to be original.

“ I suppose you need a great many gardeners to keep it up ? ” she asked suddenly.

“ We have five who do the whole garden. I think the rose-garden actually is not much trouble,” said Lady Damaris.

She was a little afraid of Miss Vulliamy, who had been invited on the strength of her writings, which were for the most part unintelligible. Lady Damaris recalled the sort of thing : “ A blue sky and a blue sky and a blue sky and things and Miranda going to get the butter milk butter buttermilk and milk and singing and a lark singing and Miranda singing and a moo moo and a blue sky and a clock and another lark singing and Miranda going to get the butter which was tea-time.” This was unusually straightforward narrative for Miss Vulliamy. Privately, Lady Damaris thought it was nonsense, but Pagnell Bois had always prided itself on being up to date. Had they not hung Picasso, the Picasso of the blue period, at Pagnell Bois some years before the war ? So Miss Vulliamy had been invited. Lady Damaris had half feared and half hoped that she would talk as she wrote ; feared, because, of course, it would make conversation a little difficult, especially at dinner ; and hoped, because in a way it would give her an undoubted value as a guest—to talk about afterwards, that is. But, to her dismay,

Miss Vulliamy had exhibited, ever since her arrival, a propensity for discussing extremely ordinary subjects in an extremely ordinary way, and, above all, for asking questions which were so intensely practical as to be almost impertinent. She had not as yet actually asked how much anything cost, but Lady Damaris could not help feeling that it might come at any moment.

Hastily, she converted her defence into an attack.

"Mr. Roxborough, Miss Vulliamy, has been so much interested in your work. He was asking some questions about *Pelican Chain*. I thought perhaps you could explain your ideas to him."

Mr. Roxborough took his cue. He could always be relied on, thought Lady Damaris. He came annually to Pagnell Bois just because of that.

"Ah, yes," he said, "Lady Damaris very kindly lent me *Pelican Chain*. I read the major part in bed yesterday evening. I cannot say that I found it conducive to sleep. It seemed to me to contain so many problems."

Miss Vulliamy had an instant and devastating vision of Mr. Roxborough sitting up in bed in his frogged pyjamas (she had seen them when Lady Bernice had taken her to look at the Thackeray

sketch in his room) and struggling to understand *Pelican Chain*. She prodded the path with the toe of her shoe, and said nothing.

Mr. Roxborough continued :

“ I was, I will confess, baffled. Not so much by your . . . er . . . gallant disregard of accident and syntax. That is a little thing . . . ”

“ Not at all,” said Miss Vulliamy. “ It is most important. It enables one to indulge in the fullest detail and retain simplicity.”

“ Ah ! ” said Mr. Roxborough. “ Ah ! ”

“ Yes,” said Lady Damaris, “ simplicity. I remember Lord Houghton saying that all good things were simple and all nice ones complicated.” She nodded her head, and then, realising her gaffe, said hurriedly :

“ Not, of course, that I mean . . . ”

Miss Vulliamy cut her short.

“ Please, Lady Damaris. I hope you’re not going to call my work *n i c e* ! ”

“ That,” thought Lady Damaris, “ is the first tactful thing the girl’s said. But I believe she means it.”

“ *Pelican Chain*,” said Mr. Roxborough, “ contains many things I admire greatly. For instance, when you say : ‘ David’s feet were big big as daisies that is not really big but seeming as

though they were meant to be noticed.' That, my dear Miss Vulliamy, has brilliancy, originality, perception."

"Thank you," said Miss Vulliamy, "but you have not quoted correctly."

Mr. Roxborough waved an airy hand.

"Of course, I could not recall it verbatim," he said, "but that is, I think, the gist of it. . . ."

Miss Vulliamy was looking straight at him. Lady Damaris noticed how prominent her cheek-bones were.

"What does the gist of it matter?" said Miss Vulliamy. "The gist of *P e l i c a n C h a i n* is that a girl is seduced and has a child, and she just goes on living at her father's farm. That doesn't sound much of a book, does it?"

"But surely the gist of things is their reason, their mainspring." Mr. Roxborough was troubled. Miss Vulliamy's mind seemed to work in such an odd way. His eyebrows and hands performed various antics. "The rest is decoration, setting, so essential, so charming, but . . ."

He paused, and Miss Vulliamy did not wait for him to formulate a phrase.

"No," she said decisively. "It is always the details that matter. What's the good of painting the most wonderful figure, let us say, on an immense

blank canvas? The background must express and interpret the figure."

"Ah, yes," said Lady Damaris. "It is always the little things that impress one."

"Yes, yes, quite," said Mr. Roxborough, lingering on the "quite." "You are right. But the figure must be there. And, in the long run, that is the object and the . . . er . . . message of the picture."

"The long run, Mr. Roxborough?" said Miss Vulliamy harshly. What was the good of talking to this old fool? "Most people spoil things by thinking of the long run. They spend all their time making provision for it. And most of them don't have one. They don't even get a walk for their money, let alone a long run."

Lady Damaris nodded her head in a way which might be taken both by Mr. Roxborough and Miss Vulliamy as agreement. This was better. The girl was talking at last; rather argumentatively, to be sure.

"I should think," went on Miss Vulliamy, "that you had always spoiled things for yourself by thinking of the long run."

Mr. Roxborough was somewhat taken aback at having the tables turned on him like this. He said: "Ah!" and stared before him.

Lady Damaris began to have an idea that Miss

Vulliamy was making a mock of Mr. Roxborough. She was trying to think of a change of subject when Lady Cleone appeared from a little path behind them. As far as her years would permit, she was tripping.

Of course, thought Mr. Roxborough, she did not look anything like her age, and she must be nearly seventy. That was so often the way with the mentally . . . the . . . er . . . mentally ailing.

Lady Cleone had a great wreath of marigolds swung round her neck. She held it out at arm's length in front of her and waved it to and fro, smiling serenely. In a high, cracked voice she was humming :

“It won't be a stylish marriage,
I can't afford a carriage,
But you'd look sweet . . .”

“Cleone !” called Lady Damaris sharply.
“Cleone !”

Lady Cleone stopped in front of them.

“I'm so sorry,” whispered Lady Damaris. “One of her bad days, I'm afraid. She has ideas, you know, Miss Vulliamy.”

Mr. Roxborough nodded sympathetically.

“You're a nice young woman,” said Lady Cleone, from the mists of her mind, to Miss Vulliamy. Miss Vulliamy smiled back at her.

"You're a nice young woman. Like I was. Shall I tell you . . ."

"Hush, Cleone," said Lady Damaris, suddenly commanding. Lady Cleone flushed, and looked at her resentfully, sullen and cowed. She went off down the path.

". . . of a bicycle made for two," she sang, and disappeared from the garden.

It was a great relief to Lady Damaris, who was wondering what to say, to see Lady Bernice and the princess enter the garden. It really was most unfortunate that Cleone should be at her oddest to-day. Miss Vulliamy had looked rather amused. That was just the way people behaved in her books. Lady Damaris had a dreadful idea that Miss Vulliamy might put Lady Cleone into one of them, vaguely perambulating a garden, festooned with marigolds, and singing antiquated musical comedy.

Mr. Roxborough jumped to his feet and bowed, as though welcoming the two ladies to some especial retreat of his own. Miss Vulliamy, too, rose.

"Bérénice and I," said the princess, "have been discussing slavery. She does not agree with me. I think it is necessary and desirable. Don't you, Mr. Roxborough?"

She smiled at him dazzlingly.

The company re-seated itself.

"Oh, Damaris," said Lady Bernice, "I have a letter that the Cardinal will be staying in our part of the country for the day next Saturday and would be glad to take luncheon here. Who have we next week-end? I hope there aren't any people who would be unsuitable. If there are, they must be put off."

"Let me see," said Lady Damaris. "The Laverys, the . . ."

"I'm sorry to intrude domestic affairs," said Lady Bernice. "And I hope you won't think I have gone over to Rome . . ." Denial of murder itself could not have been more awful than her tones. "But I am, you know, very interested in the reunion of the Christian Churches. Only the other day Lord Halifax was saying . . ."

Her voice became confidential as she spoke to Mr. Roxborough.

"The Churchills, and . . . I really can't remember them all," went on Lady Damaris. "Oh, and that young man who writes so many interviews with himself in other people's studios and drawing-rooms in one of the weekly papers. And Lord Edgehill."

"Lord Edgehill? He is at the War Office, is he not?" asked the princess. "I have met him."

"Yes. He became Parliamentary Secretary quite

recently. They say he is very promising. Of course, we knew his grandfather, the diplomatist."

"Yes. I have met him. Several times," said the princess. Her eyes were fixed dreamily before her, remembering.

Mr. Roxborough, looking at her out of the corner of his eye, hardly heard what Lady Bernice was saying.

"Old enough to know better," thought Miss Vulliamy, trespassing on the princess's gaze, which was intended for Mr. Roxborough.

"Of course, not the supremacy of the Pope, but the reunion of the Churches," Lady Bernice went on. "If Cardinal Mercier had lived . . ."

Miss Vulliamy's thoughts turned to Lord Edgehill's grandfather, whom Lady Damaris had known. Suddenly she saw the sisters as four great monuments, whom everyone came to see, unshakable and passionless as the pyramids, sitting apart eternally and watching the world go by. Lady Damaris, with a kind, consciously tolerant interest; Lady Bernice, putting all the blame on God, saying: "Thy Will be done," and giving to man all the credit, with the words: "Things have changed so since our day. It is wonderful what has been accomplished"; Lady Athaliah, watching and listening, and returning to her tower with a snarl

and a twisted laugh ; Lady Cleone, making wreaths of common flowers and taking in nothing. Miss Vulliamy would not have been in the least surprised if Lady Damaris had said : “ We knew his great-great-great-grandfather.” They seemed to be outside space and time. Four great monuments. Her thought developed : four great gargoyles, through which the discoveries and ideas of the world must spout before they could reach the common herd. For they knew everyone—everyone of any note. No one launched a reform or made a discovery but he came to Pagnell Bois and talked about it to its four châtelaines. Elihu Root and Compton Mackenzie had, it is true, refused invitations, but they were almost alone. She hated them suddenly. Gargoyles ? Vampires, rather, suckers of the vitality and brains of others, she thought, at about the same moment as Mr. Charlecote was saying the same thing to Miss Jewell in the drawing-room. What would the Jeunes be without their guests ? Four dim, old ladies, forgotten and inconsiderable. And she, Merrice Vulliamy, had come there to have her brains picked with the rest. What was their power ? They batted on people. Especially on the young. She thought of Miss Jewell. Lady Damaris had told her she was a sort of cousin. The four of them batted on her when the house was empty. Miss

Jewell looked as though her very blood were sucked, as though she hadn't a life of her own. Miss Vulliamy had been told before she came that youth above all was what was loved at Pagnell Bois. Someone (surely it must have been Maurice Baring) someone had said that the Jeunes would suffer any kind of a young fool gladly, because youth was a thing they knew nothing of, having never been young themselves. "And," he had added, "you cannot learn about youth at second hand."

The rose-garden suddenly became intolerable to Miss Vulliamy.

"I wonder, Bernice, whether the Cardinal would perhaps stay the night?" said Lady Damaris. "Or perhaps Friday night. He could have the Joinville room."

The Prince de Joinville had once been confined to his bed at Pagnell Bois for three days, with a cold in the head, in the room which ever since had borne his name.

"I think, if you don't mind, Lady Damaris, I shall go and lie down. I have rather a headache," said Miss Vulliamy.

"I am so sorry, Miss Vulliamy," said Lady Damaris.

"There is thunder in the air," offered Lady Bernice.

Mr. Roxborough rose and bowed as Miss Vulliamy sauntered away down the path. Lady Damaris watched to see if she would turn at the entrance and give the famous rose-garden one last look, as so many people had done. Miss Vulliamy, head bent, walked straight on, and presently disappeared.

Lady Damaris murmured something about arranging the rooms for the next week-end, and she and Lady Bernice followed slowly in Miss Vulliamy's wake. The princess and Mr. Roxborough were left alone.

Mr. Roxborough, while considering what he should say, and moulding and hammering it into shape, stared at a bush of brilliant Madame Edouard Herriots that flaunted beside the sundial. He appeared to be deriving considerable æsthetic satisfaction from his surroundings.

The princess settled herself as easily as she was able. The worst of seats so cut and carved as to fit the more noticeable salients of the human form is that they cannot be made to fit everybody.

The princess spoke. Marcel Proust, who put her somewhere in the *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, had called it giving tongue. "La princesse, qui ne parlait pas, mais donnait de la voix," he had said, in the midst of one of his most inordinately long and complex sentences. The

princess had been rather pleased with the remark, and had accentuated her harsh tones ever since.

The loud, vibrant voice seemed to shatter something in the rose-garden. Mr. Roxborough turned an attentive face towards her.

"Bérénice tells me that you are going to Biarritz later."

"Yes, princess. I thought I would go down there for a few weeks this summer. The Spanish season fascinates me. So much wealth displayed with so much frank ostentation. The immense Hispano-Suizas, painted all over with, perhaps, the Royal Stuart tartan, belonging to a Spaniard whose Scottish blood in more than problematical. It is Gilbertian, fantastic."

The princess smiled dazzlingly at Mr. Roxborough. She had always found that you could make people think they were much wittier by smiling than by laughing. It made them feel that, while being intensely funny, they were intelligent, and that your brain as well as your sense of humour was aroused. Her lids drooped, and flashed up again before her black eyes.

"I have a letter from my cousin," she said, after a moment, "asking me to visit her there in August. She has taken that big villa on the route de Bayonne that was built by some mad Polish prince. You

probably know it. It is rather sombre, and covered with improbable excrescences in the form of turrets. Asking, did I say? Commanding me, rather, to come. She married a Bourbon, you know, and has behaved in a royal way ever since."

The princess waved the big envelope, with the closed crown in gold on the flap, which Miss Jewell had seen in the hall, gently to and fro.

Mr. Roxborough glanced at her, and then resumed his contemplation of the roses. She was a handsome woman, he thought, very handsome. He admired her rather metallic brilliance, her somewhat brazen manner. It would be delightful if she came to Biarritz.

He drew a rhombus in the air with each hand.

"My dear princess, I hope you will come. I hope so most sincerely. The vulgar, of course, you cannot exclude. But there are so many charming people there."

It had occurred to him that the princess's cousin might have married a Spanish Bourbon.

"And one can be reasonably sure of being warm I hope, for my sake, you will visit your cousin."

The princess smiled at him again. She let her eyes darken, and tuned a magnetic tone into her great, resonant voice.

"Oh, if I were sure you would be there!"

Mr. Roxborough beamed.

“ We could do such delightful things. I have always longed to explore the Pyrénées. And the little towns of Spanish Navarre. We could do all that. And you could rescue me from the dragon, my cousin’s husband.”

Mr. Roxborough, slightly intoxicated by the princess’s smile, met the gaze of her dark, lustrous eyes. They had the greenish glow that you see when you hold a dark bottle up to the light. A charming woman, he thought. There was all that slavery nonsense, of course, that she would keep on discussing ; but a charming woman, all the same.

“ You will accept your cousin’s invitation, won’t you ? ” he asked. “ We will discover Spanish Navarre together. We will drive on Sunday evenings to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, and watch them dance the fandango in the place. We will climb the decrepit stairs in the shabby castle of Charles-Quint at Fontarabie. We will . . . ”

The princess smiled at him once more with redoubled lustre, and his discourse, which, as she had realised, was only just beginning, was cut across like a thread.

“ You make it sound enchanting. I believe I shall go there. You are a wonderful man. You make such dull things alive. I was entranced by your talk

in the picture gallery yesterday. Fancy Girtin's father making ropes ! ”

“ Oh, you flatter me, you flatter me. You know, it is only with a very few people that I feel amusing,” said Mr. Roxborough archly.

What a very English compliment that was, thought the princess. And how ridiculous Mr. Roxborough looked when he was arch ; ponderous and crude. Perhaps she could teach him a lesson.

She leant towards him, and Mr. Roxborough receded ever so little. She was attractive, if metallic ; voluptuous, if plump ; vital, if middle-aged.

His hand stole along the seat. Then his eye caught the motto carved on the back : “ And a rose her mouth,” Mr Roxborough was repelled. Almost he had behaved like a yokel by a stile. It was glaringly, overwhelmingly vulgar and obvious. With considerable artistry, he changed the motion of his hand, and took the princess's soft, white fingers gently between his own. He rose, and kissed her hand in his most distinguished manner. A faint smell of pear-drops assailed his expectant nostrils.

“ My lady siren,” he said, and plucked a great, crimson rose, which he presented to her, bowing.

She took it and breathed its scent, looking up at him over the edge of the curled petals. He could not see her expression.

FROLIC WIND

“I think,” said Mr. Roxborough, “that we should perhaps return to the terrace. It must be nearly time for tea.”

The Princess rose and took his arm, and they moved slowly down the paved path.

Mr. Roxborough flattered himself that he had rung down the curtain rather well.

CHAPTER III

Miss Vulliamy had found the atmosphere of the rose-garden intolerable. She could not bear Lady Damaris's attitude of waiting for something quotable to be said, like a circus-man trying to persuade his performing animals to show off their tricks. As if anyone could say anything original at Pagnell Bois ! The talk only fluttered about on the top of things. Of course, she quite realised why she had been invited, why everyone was invited. No one without a trick ever came to Pagnell Bois. Miss Jewell, of course, was a permanence. She could be trusted to look after any guests who came, so to speak, under false colours, who did not sing for his supper. Miss Vulliamy saw herself being handed over to Miss Jewell shortly, if she did not give a few little warbles for her keep.

She came across the rustic bridge again, not even glancing at the inscription : " Plus faict douceur que violenz," which had been carved by the Comte de Paris, and mounted the gentle slope of the shaven lawn. Under the cedar, Mrs. Murat-Blood was employed in scribbling notes in a little book,

typewritten documents fluttering all round her chaise-longue. General Tresmand was snoring audibly. Miss Vulliamy heard Mrs. Murat-Blood say : "General !" And then again, more insistently : "General !"

Miss Vulliamy walked slowly along the terrace to the door of the drawing-room, and entered. Mr. Charlecote was standing almost in the doorway, staring at a peculiar etching which hung above a table inlaid with semi-precious stones, and given to Lord Rakeshame, as Lady Damaris had explained to her the day before, by Duke Robert of Parma.

Miss Vulliamy almost bumped into Mr. Charlecote as she came in.

"Oh, Mr. Charlecote, I didn't expect to find you here."

"I'm so sorry. I'm afraid I was absorbed."

Miss Vulliamy regained her self-control, and smiled.

"Miss Vulliamy."

"Yes ?"

"I should like to draw you as you were just then. When you were startled, I mean. You suddenly looked very young and gentle. As though you were floating unreasonably in mid-air in the corner of some great Pinturicchio painting. I say Pinturicchio because you hadn't at all a holy air. You retained,

for all your surprise, that worldly look you can find in all Pinturicchio's work. Especially in some frescoes at Spello. There is one old cardinal there whose leer is—ah, well ! But in the Vatican, too. I should like to draw you like that, and then give it to the world : 'The great Merrice Vulliamy : Her Soul.' Do you believe, Miss Vulliamy, that people's souls show, just for a moment, when they are surprised ? ”

Miss Vulliamy smiled. Her soul, if that had been her soul, was well in hand now.

“ I shall have to surprise you,” she said, “ and see what I can see.”

“ Ah,” said Mr. Charlecote, “ my soul. I wonder if I could see it myself ? That would be rather nice, wouldn't it ? Spiritual narcissism.”

He stood still, and looked out of the window reflectively.

Then he said, out of the blue :

“ I wrote a little poem in my bath this morning. As an author it may interest you.”

He folded his arms, and intoned in the expressionless manner now considered suitable to poetry :

I'm a rag-picker,
and, in the summer,
my brother picks hops,
and my sister spends hours
picking flowers

FROLIC WIND

for London shops ;
my father picks pockets at races (we
are all honest but he) ;
and my aunt picks her teeth ;
we cannot pick and choose.

“ I had thought,” he said, “ of calling it
‘ Picaresque.’ ”

“ Delightful,” she said, “ delightful.”

Mr. Charlecote surveyed her humorously.

“ Delightful,” he repeated, “ but——? ”

“ Well, yes,” said Miss Vulliamy, “ delightful,
but . . . nonsense.

“ Have you ever read any of my work, Mr.
Charlecote ? ” she added.

Mr. Charlecote found the opportunity irresistible.

“ Never.”

“ Why ? ”

Mr. Charlecote ran his fingers through his
hair. To Miss Vulliamy he seemed very attrac-
tive, with his hair all disordered, and the parting
lost.

“ You will grant that every quality is relative ? ”
he asked.

Miss Vulliamy acceded to this. It was, indeed,
part of her creed.

“ That your black is my white ? ” went on Mr.
Charlecote. “ Well, can’t you see that perhaps your
nonsense is my sense, and . . . ? ”

He smiled very disarmingly. Miss Vulliamy considered ; of course, she had been trapped ; she could not possibly resent what he had said. She shrugged her big, square shoulders. Mr. Charlecote watched her out of the corner of his eye. He perceived that he had scored. It was impossible to resist teasing Miss Vulliamy.

“ Look at this etching now,” he said. “ Rops’s sense is lots of people’s nonsense. It is unpleasant. It is not agreeable to draw a picture of a woman and a monkey ridding themselves of vermin. Or I suppose that is what they are doing, scratching away like that. Have you seen many of his things ? ”

“ Oh, yes,” said Miss Vulliamy vaguely.

“ Ah,” said he, “ of course, yes. Well, look at this one. The woman is gross. She is naked and badly shaped. On the whole, it is rather disgusting. Yet it is, in another way, a wonderful picture. That is one sense.”

He wondered whether Miss Vulliamy would see that he was relenting, subtly making up for his remark about her work.

“ You will remember it. It lives,” he said.

Now, thought Miss Vulliamy, he was trying to cover up his rudeness. She would have respected him more if he had let his statement stand.

She was obviously impressed by the drawing. It lived, there was no doubt about that.

“What are you aiming at in your painting?” she asked suddenly.

Mr. Charlecote considered for a little, and then shrugged his shoulders.

“Perhaps it’s too early to say,” he said. “I’m really only beginning, you know. You know the simile of Rilke’s? In that odd little prose-poem about the death of his ancestor, Cornet Christoph Rilke. When they are all sitting round the camp-fire, telling tales, and the German : *Laut und langsam setzt er seine Worte. Wie ein Mädchen, das Blumen bindet . . .*”

“English, please,” said Miss Vulliamy.

“Oh, well : ‘he places his words loud and slowly, like a girl who is binding a bunch of flowers, and thoughtfully tries one flower after another, and still does not know what will come of the whole.’ Still experimenting, let’s say.”

“Yes, I see,” said Miss Vulliamy. “It’s a good simile.”

She was becoming interested. She felt that if only Mr. Charlecote would be serious he would be charming to talk to. But she could not help being argumentative. Argument was her idea of discussion ; for her, discussion and conversation were synonymous.

"You're just like all the rest," she said. "No idea where you're going. Just muddling along."

"Does it matter?" said Mr. Charlecote, with a lift of his brows. "Does it matter if we get anywhere?"

"No," she answered, "not in the least. But you must try. You must . . ."

Came the sound of an opening door, and the slam thereof, and a tap-tap on the flags of the terrace.

Mr. Charlecote, seizing the slim forelock of escape, raised a silencing finger.

"Lady Athaliah!"

"Oh," cried Miss Vulliamy, "I daren't meet her. I'm terrified of her. She fixes me with that Ancient Mariner eye and grinds sarcasm at me till I shake and quiver and feel responsible for all the follies of the world. Only before lunch she told me that she thought she had known my father. She said he had been attached to the embassy in Paris when she was there with Lord Rakeshame. Under the Second Empire. 'He was in love with Pauline Metternich,' she said, 'but lived with a chorus girl from La Belle H  l  ne.' And then she hummed, in a most extraordinary, deep, tuneless voice :

Oh, ces nymphes et ces d  esses,
Pour enj  ler des gar  ons,
Ont de dr  les de fa  ons.

Poor father, who is a country parson!"

She fled across the room and out into the corridor, and left Mr. Charlecote, looking rather blank and still anchored in front of the etching by Félicien Rops, to await Lady Athaliah's coming.

Miss Vulliamy proceeded down the passage to the hall, and up the wide, shallow stairs of green-veined marble. She went very slowly. The heavy marble was tiring on this hot afternoon, and she had nothing in particular to do. She could not do any work in this great, majestic, foolish house. She hated the Palladian style. It was so much a child's idea of grandeur ; a caricature.

She went along to her room.

It was a large, pleasant room, spoiled by walls covered in damask paper of a ponderous olive green. There was a huge, stately tester bed, draped and festooned with olive green velvet, and surmounted by rather moth-eaten plumes. Miss Vulliamy was consumed with dread that maggots might fall on her from them as she slept. But the windows opened on to the parkland before the house. From them you could see the grove where Prince Louis Napoléon had walked, and the beech planted by the Prince Consort. There were, indeed, other objects of historical and intellectual interests than these, but Miss Vulliamy did not contemplate them. Lady Damaris had not yet guided her to the front of the

house, which remained, therefore, so far unspoiled for her. It was very charming and quiet. Her thoughts expanded.

She had felt rather at a loss with Mr. Charlecote. He was so very definite, and appeared to say just whatever came into his mind. At any rate, he was a great success with their hostesses. Not that he said anything brilliant. She could think of much more brilliant things to say. (They were, she admitted to herself, rather Bloomsbury-brilliant.) But he kept up a fairly level standard of agreeable insolence, which people seemed to like. Even Mrs. Murat-Blood had inclined to him, and laughed at his antics. That was what they were : antics. Conceivably, were she to say everything that came into her head, she, too, would be a success. But it was infinitely more probable that she would be merely rude. What an unpleasant mind she must have !

Of course, Mr. Charlecote was much more conspicuously young than she ; perhaps that was why he was a success. He was ostentatiously young, aggressively young.

After a little, she decided she would change for tea. She went over to the wardrobe and surveyed her clothes, wishing in a half-stifled way that she had a maid to ring for.

After due thought, she determined not to wear

green. Clear, pure greens did not really suit her, and she could not bring herself to wear muddy, artistic shades. She had very few frocks. There was one, of course, which was marvellous ; Drécol. It had been a great extravagance. But it was hardly the frock for tea. It was black, and had a great snake embroidered round and round it, its sparkling tail at the hem, its great jewelled head on her breast. A fantastic frock. It was all very well for some things, but not, she felt, for tea at Pagnell Bois. " Pour les courses," they had said, when she bought it. " Longchamp, Ascot . . ."

Then it occurred to her that she had not been invited to be conventional. She realised that something odd was expected of her, and that hitherto she had behaved in the most drearily respectable way. She had behaved, in fact, very like Miss Jewell. She decided to wear the Drécol frock.

As she put it on, and saw how smoothly the fabric sheathed her thighs and arms, she was glad she had refused to dress queerly. She had seen that to write as she did and to wear odd clothes was to overdo it, so she had tried always to be excessively smart. And this Drécol dress, strange as it might be, was exceptionally smart. She had a horrible feeling that Mr. Charlecote would call it bizarre.

It might not be the right thing to wear, but it

undoubtedly suited her. She had an air in this ; as great an air of the world as the princess. Perhaps this would impress the others ; or perhaps they would only be the more anxious for her to talk as she wrote. She had, for a moment, a wild desire to do it.

Her preenings before the mirror were interrupted by a rap at her door. She called a toneless : " Come ! " She was of those who do not say : " Come in."

Round the door came, surprisingly enough, poor little Miss Jewell ; Cecilia, Cecily, Cissie, whatever her name was. She hesitated on the threshold, visibly embarrassed.

Miss Vulliamy smiled encouragingly.

" Oh, may . . . may I come in ? " Miss Jewell fluttered.

" Please."

" I wondered—that is, I wanted to ask you if . . . Perhaps you have . . ." she floundered. Miss Vulliamy tried to look sympathetic. Miss Jewell finished with a rush.

" Don't you think I look rather p a l e ? "

Miss Vulliamy considered her studiously, and nodded.

Miss Jewell took courage.

" I haven't got any more rouge left. I wondered if you could lend me some."

Liar, thought Miss Vulliamy, she had never had any.

She said :

“ How tiresome for you, dear. Of course, you can have some of mine. There are several shades there on the dressing-table. Have which you like.”

Miss Vulliamy hated lending her cosmetics. She had been known to pitch a perfectly new lipstick out of the window because a friend had used it. But she felt she could not refuse poor Miss Jewell. Anyhow, it was not going to be used on her mouth.

“ Oh, thank you,” breathed Miss Jewell, and regarded the flotilla of pots and flasks that sailed the glass top of the dressing-table. She opened one or two vaguely. Miss Vulliamy took pity on her.

“ I should think this would do for you,” she said, unscrewing a lipstick which seemed to Miss Jewell to be of a peculiarly virulent shade of carmine.

And why a lipstick, she wondered.

“ Rub it in well with cream, and you’ll find it’ll look rather nice, I think,” went on Miss Vulliamy.

Miss Jewell hesitated yet.

Miss Vulliamy, wondering inwardly at the discovery of her repressed maternal instinct, again took mercy.

“ Would you like me to make you up ? ” she asked.

“ Oh, please.” Miss Jewell’s face lost its anxiety, and was wreathed in smiles. “ That would be sweet of you.”

When she had covered Miss Jewell’s face in cream, and was massaging gently with the tips of her fingers :

“ Why didn’t you tell me you’d never used any maquillage before ? ” asked Miss Vulliamy.

Miss Jewell was aghast, and blushed through the cream.

“ I thought you’d laugh at me. But suddenly I felt I needed a little colour, just from the cheeks up towards the ears. With this frock, you know. That and my hair make me look rather pale. And, after all, Lady Damaris e n a m e l s.”

She had never thought Miss Vulliamy would be so nice. There was quite a sisterly smile on her face.

“ You always need a little colour, dear,” said Miss Vulliamy. “ And certainly with that frock. It is charming. It goes with your hair so well. Why do people with red hair so often imagine they can wear green, when they ought always to keep to fawns and coppery tints ? ”

She was surprised at herself. She would never have believed that, nowadays, she would have offered to make up Miss Jewell’s rather plain face. Of course, once . . . She laughed at herself, and drew horizontal

stripes on Miss Jewell's cheeks with the carmine lipstick. Miss Jewell gasped. Miss Vulliamy spread the colour smoothly abroad over her skin with practised fingers, and powdered vigorously. Miss Jewell glanced sidelong, with a new vision, at Miss Vulliamy's delicately roseate complexion.

Finally, she surveyed herself in the glass. The dim flush, into which the vivid stripes had so miraculously been transformed, made all the difference. She turned to Miss Vulliamy to thank her, stretching out her hands spontaneously, like a child.

Suddenly an idea arose in Miss Vulliamy's mind, with the air of being the solution of some problem that she had set to her subconsciousness to work out. How had Miss Jewell known so accurately where the colour should go? Miss Jewell, declared her subconsciousness, rather disconnectedly, was doing all this for Mr. Charlecote. There was simply no other explanation. Miss Vulliamy wondered whether he had talked to her about Félicien Rops. She almost loosed a laugh—one of her loudest laughs—but turned it into a smile to meet Miss Jewell's thanks.

"It really is nice of you," said Miss Jewell. "I can't thank you enough. Quite right, I do need colour."

Miss Vulliamy felt the remark was not addressed to her.

"But what a wonderful dress you have on." Miss Jewell had only just noticed the snake. "I think it's marvellous. There can't be another like it."

"I hope not," said Miss Vulliamy. "It was a model. I'm glad you like it. I was afraid you might think it outré."

Miss Jewell had one of her flashes of penetration.

"Didn't you want me to think it outré?" she asked, and then immediately spoiled her phrase with good manners. "Not outré, really, I don't mean. But just tremendously smart, you know. I hope you didn't think me rude."

Miss Jewell vanished from the room amid more thanks, and left Miss Vulliamy looking at the snake in the mirror.

Poor little Miss Jewell, she thought, dressing up for Mr. Charlecote. The green and scarlet head of the snake winked at her from the depths of the glass. Was that what she was doing? Her hands rose to pull off the Drécol frock. As if she would do that—what Miss Jewell did. She would not take it off. That would be a confession.

She could not imagine herself dressing up for Mr. Charlecote. A conceited young man. No, that savoured of resentment, and she had nothing to resent. Rather, a very young, charming, spoiled young

FROLIC WIND

man. In any case, she thought with finality, he looked rather effeminate.

She gave her face a final powdering, dabbed a little scent tenderly behind her ears and on the hair at her temples, and walked slowly out of the room and downstairs.

CHAPTER IV

Mr. Charlecote continued to look reflectively at the Félicien Rops after the abrupt departure of Miss Vulliamy, while the clack-clack of Lady Athaliah's cane approached down the terrace.

At length a shadow was flung across the wall, and he turned to see Lady Athaliah in the doorway. She looked at him rather crookedly. One side of her mouth was permanently higher than the other.

Been sneering all her life, thought Mr. Charlecote, old hag.

For a moment Lady Athaliah regarded him in silence.

Then :

"I can't remember your name," she said.

Mr. Charlecote made an exaggerated bow.

"Edmund Hubert Stourton Charlecote," he said.

"I am usually called Alexis."

"Why?" asked Lady Athaliah.

Mr. Charlecote shrugged.

"It's a fairly nice name," he said, "I ask you, could one be called Edmund or Hubert? I put a lot

of names in a hat, and Alexis came out first. I have also been known as Juanito and Peter."

"Ha!" said Lady Athaliah. Like, in all probability, the celebrated "Ha" of King Harry, it was rather a gastric noise.

"You are a simple soul," she said, "a very simple soul. What are you doing in this house?"

Mr. Charlecote was genuinely surprised. He said nothing, and smiled at Lady Athaliah. But he could not prevent a little ghost of a tune from escaping from his lips. He was annoyed at this; attempted melody was so renowned an expedient of masculine defence. It set him at once at a disadvantage with Lady Athaliah.

"You are," she went on, "I am convinced, a very ordinary young man. I expect you take a very serious view of life in the company of your contemporaries, and a gay and courageous one in the society of your elders. I am very old. It is very nice to be very old. One's vainglory is attributed to the era of one's youth, and one's humilities are unnoticed. On the other hand, you are of an age when to be told you are arrogant is a compliment."

As Mr. Charlecote had been standing for a long time—ever since, in fact, Miss Jewell left the room—and Lady Athaliah showed no sign of sitting down, he moved his position and strolled across beyond her

to the window. He rehearsed all these reasons to himself, so as to be quite sure that he was not moving in order to avoid having to support the gaze of Lady Athaliah's upturned eyes.

She watched him for a few moments. Then she went back on to the terrace, and, leaning on her cane, addressed him over her shoulder.

"Come with me," she said, "I will show you something."

Mr. Charlecote followed her, hardly of his own volition. He wondered why he obeyed her so unquestioningly. They went along the terrace side by side.

"I am told," observed Lady Athaliah, "that you are full of promise."

Mr. Charlecote made noises in his throat deprecating praise.

"General Tresmand was full of promise once," said Lady Athaliah. On the last word she waved her cane vindictively in the direction of one of the offending peacocks. "Now he has sent in his papers, and will be remembered always because he ordered his men to fire on a pack of dirty niggers and his men didn't miss. Mr. Roxborough was full of promise. Pah ! So," she ended, "was I."

Mr. Charlecote, startled at the transformation of what he had taken for a compliment into what he

could only classify as an awful warning, could think of no rejoinder. The only thing that came into his head was to ask what Lady Athaliah had promised, and he had not quite the nerve for that.

They arrived at the tower, and Lady Athaliah produced a key from some obscurity of her black dress and opened the door. Inside was a cheerful square room, of no particular character, which occupied the entire ground space of the tower. In the corner was a staircase. Mr. Charlecote had been rather pleased that he was going to see the interior of Lady Athaliah's home. He had expected something sombre, mysterious, possibly rather garish and theatrical. This was a disappointment. The chintz curtains, the faded carpet, the chesterfields and the water-colours, the neatly balanced cabinets of buhl and counter-buhl and the brass-topped Indian table, might have been found in a dozen suburbs.

Lady Athaliah relocked the door behind her.

She sat down in a large, cushioned armchair. She waved her hand towards a large silver box filled with cigarettes.

"Help yourself," she said, "Turk or virgin."

Mr. Charlecote took a gasper, and then, noticing that the big brass ash-tray beside the box was full of charred, crushed stumps, offered the box to Lady Athaliah, who refused.

“Go and put on the gramophone before you sit down,” she said. “Put on some Massenet. You will find a Spanish record there. ‘El ultimo sueño de la Virgen.’ That will do, I think.”

Mr. Charlecote went over to the gramophone, a large cabinet of mahogany. This, he thought, was very disappointing. The suburban atmosphere was enhanced by the wireless set he saw in the corner. Was all this mystery that surrounded Lady Athaliah’s tower a myth? Was it just a joke she played on the world, living really a commonplace, dim existence, and merely encouraging the rumour of strange things within the tower to ensure her privacy? From the way people talked about her, one was led to believe that she might be a mistress of warlockry, or celebrate on certain feasts some fearful, nameless eucharist.

He put on the record, and returned to the chesterfield opposite Lady Athaliah. He looked at her, and wondered why people were afraid of her. She was really quite a mild old lady. He noticed that on the lower stage of the table were copies of *Good Housekeeping* and *Punch*.

Lady Athaliah, nodding her head rhythmically and apparently listening to the music, spoke suddenly.

“Don’t play around with those girls,” she said ;

“it only excites them, and then there’s a hell of a to-do.”

Mr. Charlecote did not feel that this required any answer. He felt baffled. He could not place the atmosphere of the room. His eye fell on the copy of *Punch*, and he observed that it was two years old. Like a dentist’s waiting-room, he thought. The idea gave him the key to the room. It was only a waiting-room, an antechamber, giving, like the dentist’s, no indication of what lay beyond. His curiosity was aroused to discover what was upstairs. Perhaps there was something in the Lady Athaliah legend after all. He pictured strange retorts and heathen alphabets, weird pentacles, and interesting emblems, by whose means Lady Athaliah wrought thaumaturgic feats. It rather pleased his imagination to consider her as a witch. He wondered that he had ever been taken in by the room, and its air of genteel commonplace.

Lady Athaliah’s voice tore through Massenet’s melodious fabric.

“Leave virgins alone,” she said. “Go away and paint. Paint women like Rops. I saw you looking at that thing of his. If you want women, have women like that—good, ample women, who’ll take the life out of you, who’ll want some satisfying. Leave Cissie and that amorphous writer-person alone.

I read a book of hers. She's all mental. Fly like a hare if you touched her. Knows all about reactions and nothing about actions."

Mr. Charlecote cleared his throat. He wanted to say something, but did not quite know what. Lady Athaliah forced the pace too much for him, who was used to setting his own tempo.

Lady Athaliah continued.

"I suppose you've made money. Well, spend it."

"I have," said Mr. Charlecote.

"That's the best thing I've heard about you yet. Don't save. Don't ever save anything. Copy nature. She never saves. She's the best advertisement for extravagance there is. That's what's wrong with us all. People talk about being more natural. How can they when all they do is to save and insure and invest and think of rainy days? Squander, spend, scatter your goods. If everyone did it, we'd all be happy."

"Isn't waste rather disgusting?" said Mr. Charlecote fastidiously. Lady Athaliah made him rather fastidious.

"Waste not, have not," announced Lady Athaliah. "Nothing squandered is wasted. I waste a good deal. I hoard."

"Not advice, Lady Athaliah," said Mr. Charlecote, with a return of his impudence. He smiled in

his most engaging manner, but Lady Athaliah disregarded him.

"I thought," she said, "that you had some sense. Most young people have some sense. Then they grow out of it, and have a standard of values instead."

Mr. Charlecote bowed mockingly.

"Out of your own mouth, Lady Athaliah," he said. She did not seem to consider his insolence either agreeable or offensive.

"No," said she, "I wasted that advice. But never mind. Here's another thing. Don't go muddling up love and desire. They're perfectly different things. A few people realise that, and absolutely none practise it. After all, we all know of things which are pleasing to our palates but fatal to our digestions. There you have it."

Mr. Charlecote had quite regained his usual self-possessed expression. This was really rather amusing.

"Your philosophy is so extensive, Lady Athaliah," he said.

"No. Cleone's is. Have you seen her to-day? She's rather bad, I'm told. She always says everything that comes into her mind. Little ever comes, but what does is appallingly apposite. I'm afraid of her."

"Afraid of her? You, Lady Athaliah, afraid of her?" Mr. Charlecote said.

Lady Athaliah's face was momentarily distorted. Her voice rose in passion.

"Yes. She speaks the truth. She's quite right. I don't. You don't. We're both blind, callow, bunglers!" she shouted.

Mr. Charlecote, enraged by the three worst insults it was possible to hurl at him, and beginning to think that he was locked up in a tower with a lunatic, got up and smiled rather nervously. Lady Athaliah's leering face mocked him. For a moment he felt he would like to feel her throat between his fingers.

The next instant he felt better. He laughed at himself that he would have liked to strangle her. She was only an old, desiccated spinster, repulsive, wrinkled, not quite sane. But her eyes held his all the same. There was some magic in the room, something that made him feel the old hag's presence as a definite, mighty force. He ran his fingers through his hair.

"You promised you would show me something, Lady Athaliah," he said.

The secret of the tower, he thought, what was it? Lady Athaliah chuckled.

"Not this time," she said, "not this time. One day

I will show you. And then you shall paint my portrait, and you shall put all you have seen into it. A great picture it will be."

Mr. Charlecote smiled vaguely. He hoped he would be able to get out of that ; character portraits, he felt, had been rather overdone.

"Now," said Lady Athaliah, "we will go and have tea. I enjoy my food."

She got up and crossed the room to the door. Mr. Charlecote remained for a moment looking round the room. He wondered again what was upstairs. He went over to the gramophone and took off the record. From there he could see upstairs : darkness, and a gleam of light ; more stairs.

"It stops electrically," said Lady Athaliah, with a chuckle, "and you can't see anything from there. Come along, Alexis Juanito."

Mr. Charlecote followed her out of the tower, with an expression that his mirror would have told him was quizzical, and Miss Vulliamy defiant. Under the cedar, a gleam of silver and white linen summoned them to tea.

CHAPTER V

Mrs. Joachim Murat-Blood looked up from a heavily annotated agenda sheet and observed Miss Vulliamy cross the lawn and go into the house with long, clumsy strides. "Just like my land-girls during the war," she thought. Mrs. Murat-Blood always spoke and thought of "my" land-girls and "my" women's clubs, just as Lady Bernice said "my" Sunday school and "my" Vicar, although the Pagnell Bois advowson had been sold years ago. General Tresmand was snoring audibly ; had, indeed, been snoring for some time past. It distracted Mrs. Murat-Blood's attention from her work ; it was a desecration of the golden afternoon.

"General !" said Mrs. Murat-Blood, and again, more insistently : "General !"

The general answered with a deep and resonant snore.

Over the rustic bridge (such a strange contrast, Mrs. Murat-Blood thought, to the Palladian mansion) came Lady Damaris and Lady Bernice. They went slowly over to the far side of the lawn and sat down under a great chestnut, whose withered flowers

were so like candle-ends of a Christmas-tree that is being kept intact till New Year's Eve.

That left only Mr. Roxborough and the princess in the rose-garden, concluded Mrs. Murat-Blood, who prided herself on her observation. She did not like the princess. She seemed to Mrs. Murat-Blood not to be very good style. She had been told that the princess was sixty, but found it hard to believe. She painted heavily of course, but that could not obliterate wrinkles. It was not as though she enamelled, like Lady Damaris, whose face presented a smoothness as of porcelain, so artificial and unearthly as to be almost eerie on a living person, such that in past years she had frequently been mistaken for royalty.

The general continued to snore.

Lady Athaliah and Mr. Charlecote came out of the drawing-room and went along the terrace towards the tower. Mrs. Murat-Blood had not noticed Lady Athaliah leave her tower. She wondered why Mr. Charlecote was being taken there. She thought Lady Athaliah a little mad, and wondered why anyone was afraid of her, or thought there was any mystery on her tower. She had heard the most fantastic stories about that tower—stories as strange and idiotic and meaningless as the myriad horrors attributed to Glamis. To Mrs. Murat-Blood, Lady

Athaliah merely seemed a foolish, tyrannical old lady. The way she treated poor Miss Jewell infuriated Mrs. Murat-Blood. She decided she must talk to Miss Jewell about the rights of the individual, and in especial about the rights of the female individual.

Mrs. Murat-Blood considered that she had rather wasted her time in coming to Pagnell Bois for the week-end. There was nobody there who would be of much use to her. Mr. Roxborough already subscribed heavily to all her charities, and there was no one else worth considering. Of course, Mr. Charlecote was a charming boy, but Mrs. Murat-Blood had far too much to do to waste her time with charming boys. That again reminded her of a story about the princess. They said she kept at her villa at Cap Ferrat, in constant attendance, three wretched gigolos—one, an Argentino, to dance tangos and waltzes ; a second, an Englishman, for foxtrots and Charlestons ; and a third, a polyglot Russian, to read aloud to her. It was, of course, certainly untrue that she had a fourth to maid her. . . . Mrs. Murat-Blood felt the greatest scorn for the princess ; not for the gigolos, who were, after all, earning their livings somehow in these difficult days ; especially, there was every excuse for the Russian.

“What,” she murmured aloud to herself, “can

be the feelings of a woman who can bring herself to pay for her men?" It did not occur to her that they might be much the same as those of a man who pays for his women.

With a sigh she returned to her work, but the general's snoring made concentration quite impossible, and she had a particularly weighty problem to resolve before the next committee meeting.

"General!" she called loudly, and hurled the volume of Maynard Keynes to the earth with a crash.

Across the lawn, Lady Damaris and Lady Bernice looked up for a moment.

The general stirred brusquely and muttered, rising gradually to the surface of sleep, with much the same noises made by a person rising to the surface of the water after prolonged immersion.

"I'm so sorry," said Mrs. Murat-Blood. "I dropped my book. I'm afraid I disturbed you."

"Not at all, not at all," said the general, wiping slumber from his eyes and rustling *The Times*. "Wasn't asleep. Just resting."

Round the corner of the pond appeared Lady Cleone, and disappeared into the rhododendron thicket. She was walking with an ungainly, light-some motion, and had garlands of marigolds around her neck.

"How curious!" said Mrs. Murat-Blood. "I had no idea poor Lady Cleone was so bad as that. How funny those marigolds looked."

The general grunted.

"When I was in Benares," he said, "you used to see great chains of marigolds swung across the river. The Hindus put them there. To welcome Mother Ganges, or something. Very pretty they were."

"I don't believe he's properly awake yet," thought Mrs. Murat-Blood.

Mrs. Murat-Blood felt strongly about the Hindus, and was on the committee of a Zenana Mission, and had welcomed Miss Katherine Mayo's book as a gospel, but it was no earthly good discussing it with the general. She was relieved to see Jerrold, the butler, and two dark-blue satellites emerge from the house burdened with tea-things. They came across the lawn to the cedar, and began to set them in order. There was an immense silver tea-pot, emblazoned with the lymphad of Jeune, and a heavy decanter with a silver label, and, in odd contrast to their Victorian solidity, a tall syphon and a silver cocktail-shaker. Lady Damaris was in everything up to date.

The general shook off his lethargy.

"Tea?" he said. "Tea already? Why, I must have rested longer than I intended. I promised to

go over and see the Stebbings this afternoon. Jerrold, I want a car at once. Dear me, I shall have to hurry. Very tiresome."

He went shambling away over the lawn, fanning himself with his handkerchief.

Mrs. Murat-Blood rose as Lady Damaris and Lady Bernice came across the lawn. It was amazing, she thought, how straight and slim Lady Damaris kept for her age.

"So the general went to sleep," said Lady Damaris. "He always does. Just like Prince Hohenlohe in the rose-garden. I wonder where everyone is. Ah, here comes Miss Vulliamy. What an odd dress she has on."

Miss Vulliamy, the beaded snake glistening in the sunlight, came down from the terrace.

"It's very striking," said Lady Bernice.

"I like it," said Mrs. Murat-Blood.

"And here are Athénée and Mr. Roxborough," whispered Lady Bernice. "I wonder whether they have been discussing slavery. How flushed you look, Mr. Roxborough. I hope the sun hasn't been too much for you."

"It is rather hot," said Mr. Roxborough, becoming conscious that he was flushed.

"Oh, we stayed on the shady side of the garden," said the princess.

“And there come Sir Lothar and Mrs. Dawe,” said Lady Damaris. “I’m so glad Sir Lothar managed to catch the 3.10. He is such a busy man, you know.”

Jerrold was piloting two people down from the drawing-room ; a big, burly man in loose-hanging clothes, and a little, dapper woman in blue. As they approached, the princess slipped quietly away.

To Mr. Charlecote, as he came out of the tower after Lady Athaliah, the man seemed vaguely familiar. He wondered where he had seen him ; or had it been a photograph in a paper ? Hurrying after the new arrivals he saw Miss Jewell, looking somehow fresher and more alive, in a russet dress that toned delightfully with her hair.

As he reached the group under the cedar, Lady Damaris was introducing people.

“Mrs. Murat-Blood, Mrs. Dawe, my sister, Lady Athaliah. Mr. . . .” she murmured. Nobody paid much attention to her, but looked around for a comfortable chair and a promising face, bowing vaguely at anyone whose eye he caught. The group gradually ceased to be fluid, and crystallised into some sort of order.

“Tea, Mrs. Murat-Blood ?” said Lady Damaris. “Or there are drinks by Mr. Roxborough.”

Mr. Charlecote found himself installed beside

the dapper, little woman in blue. She was pale and thin, like a moulting canary, he thought. A certain fluffiness of her *nichtsagend* dress completed the resemblance.

“Dympna, Dympna,” he thought, “what a long way off you are !”

Miss Jewell was helping Lady Damaris to pour out, and offering to Mr. Roxborough sandwiches, which he disregarded.

“Did you say a whisky-and-soda, Sir Lothar ? I’m sure it will do you good after your journey,” said Lady Damaris, and waved Miss Jewell towards the massy decanter and syphon.

Mr. Charlecote remembered at once. Of course, it was Sir Lothar Marienwürmchen. He was thrice glad indeed that he had come to Pagnell Bois : once, because it was a mark of indistinction not to have been there, unless, to be sure, you took steps to let it be known that you had refused, as D’Annunzio and Richard Oke had done ; twice, because of Dympna ; and thrice, because of Sir Lothar, who was at that moment booming something at Miss Vulliamy. He had always wanted to meet Sir Lothar, that curious and famous man. In many ways unmistakably English, he had no national feeling, and, in spite of frequent urging during the war, had refused to translate his aggressively Germanic name.

He had been called the King of the Dilettanti, but that, in view of his expert archæological work, was hardly fair. That, indeed, was all he did, but wherever there were happenings of interest, international conferences, political crises, artistic achievements, financial operations of the first magnitude, there, holding a mysterious watching brief, was Sir Lothar Marienwürmchen. He was of fabulous wealth : for him smoked Midland and Pennsylvanian chimneys, oil of Mexico and Caucasia flowed, Alpine hotels and American country-clubs plied their noisy trades, citrus grew in Africa north and south, Polynesian copra dried and Brazilian coffee flowered, Argentinian sheep were shorn and Argentinian mutton froze, sugar of the Antilles and wheat of Canada, cotton of Egypt and silk of Japan, were tended by black man and white, brown and yellow, ships of every tonnage ploughed the varied seas ; an entire department was said to be devoted to the business of his super-tax ; he used the transatlantic telephone almost daily. You would hear his name whispered in the lobby of the House and in the wagon-restaurant of the Orient express ; it would flash from the lips of a painted youth in the Ritz bar or from those of a maiden before a tender green Cézanne in Bloomsbury ; it was spoken in the quiet rooms of the Quai d'Orsay, the retreats of

Roehampton, the alleys of Charlottenburg, the gloomy salons of the rue aux Laines, the restaurants of Lisle Street, and the halls of the Sporting Club on Monte Igueldo ; no doubt, too, in the offices of Moscow. In Vienna, Frau Sacher, it was said, had hung his photograph among her rows of royal and noble likenesses.

Mr. Charlecote's attention was recalled by a voice at his elbow. The lady in blue, with an anxious, vertical crease between her eyebrows, was talking to him.

" . . . admired it so much, Mr. Charlecote. Such exquisitely balanced composition. My dear husband always said that was the great thing."

Mr. Charlecote wondered which of his pictures she was discussing, and how in the world she had managed to catch his name. Probably she was referring to his " Sleeping Saint," which half London had acclaimed as a masterpiece and the other half condemned as a most subtle and insidious attack upon religion and morals. Everyone talked about that. " So magnetic," had said Lady Damaris. " To be frank, an unpleasant picture "—this from the general—" but striking, very striking."

Mr. Charlecote murmured something to the lady, and offered her food. She took a cress sandwich, which, in the manner of cress sandwiches, soon

became obstreperous. To his relief, also, Lady Bernice asked her if she had had a pleasant time in Corsica. Mr. Charlecote made a mental note to talk to her about travel. People who had been to Corsica were always glad of an opportunity to talk about it. The lady, struggling with the cress sandwich, made answer to Lady Bernice, who addressed her as Mrs. Dawe.

Mr. Charlecote realised at once that she must be the widow of Alberich Dawe, the dramatic critic, who had committed suicide a year or two back.

" . . . charming," Mrs. Dawe was saying. Somehow one never heard the beginnings of her remarks. "Of course, I was there with my dear husband years ago. It had altered enormously. In many ways it is much improved. It used to be quite impossible to stay at Piana (the most beautiful place, Lady Bernice, all high red cliffs, covered with blue rosemary), but now one is quite comfortable there. But I remember Alberich saying they would never really develop the island until they had some sort of home rule. The French, you know, don't really take any interest in it."

"Ah!" said Mr. Roxborough, "it was a pity we ever relinquished it."

"I didn't know we ever had it," said Mrs. Dawe, taking another sandwich.

Mr. Roxborough plunged into a morass of dates.

Mr. Charlecote shifted his position by insensible degrees until he was almost beside Miss Vulliamy, opposite Sir Lothar, who gave him a swift, searching glance, but did not meet his eyes.

Mr. Charlecote noticed Miss Vulliamy's remarkable dress. It certainly suited her, but it was grotesque.

Miss Vulliamy hoped he would not say it was bizarre.

At the first opportunity, when Sir Lothar left off booming at her to drink some whisky, Mr. Charlecote said :

"I must congratulate you on your frock, Miss Vulliamy. I couldn't have designed you a better one myself. Molyneux, isn't it?"

"No," replied Miss Vulliamy sweetly, "I made it myself."

When she thought of the extravagant price she had paid for it, she felt a perverse satisfaction.

"Frock?" said Sir Lothar, from the depths of his glass. "Very nice frock. But I should like to see you in a sort of Minoan dress. A kind of farthingale affair, you know, with practically nothing above the waist. At least, that's what I think," he added.

A silence followed this statement. Lady Damaris smiled non-committally; Mr. Charlecote smiled

rather committally at Miss Vulliamy ; Lady Athaliah laughed, and Miss Vulliamy smiled brazenly at Sir Lothar.

“ I am afraid,” she said, mindful of the fact that she was meant to create effects, “ that I do not strip well.”

Nobody seemed to be particularly amused.

“ You have only just come back from Cyprus, haven't you, Sir Lothar ? ” asked Mr. Charlecote.

Miss Vulliamy gazed with a tawdry interest at Sir Lothar, who boomed :

“ Two months ago. Much too hot. I'm glad to have a rest after a strenuous winter unearthing Cypriote drains.”

From the far side of the circle, Mrs. Dawe chimed in :

“ I touched at Cyprus once travelling with my husband. Of course, in those days there was hardly anything to see there. And then we went on to Crete, but there again no one had done any work at Knossos then.”

As no one offered any comment, Mrs. Dawe went on :

“ How did you come back ? I remember that we went to Athens, and then by sea to Brindisi. It must have been the last Holy Year. Not '25, that is, but . . . oh, what a long time ago ! I remember, in Italy

we were always finding we had got dispensations of one sort or another for having visited some especially remote church. Just as sightseers."

Mr. Charlecote thought Mrs. Dawe a nuisance. He wanted to talk to Sir Lothar about Minoan art, and Mrs. Dawe would side-track.

Miss Vulliamy was thinking that Mrs. Dawe mistook Baedeker for conversation. A modern failing, she reflected, and one of the penalties of improved communications.

Sir Lothar stared at Mrs. Dawe resentfully.

"Through Brindisi?" he said. "I wanted to come through Italy. I wanted to see some people in Rome about the work at Herculaneum. I should have liked to be in on that. It's going to make Pompeii and Timgad and Rome look like rubbish-heaps. At least, that's what I think," he ended.

Mr. Charlecote wondered why he weakened his remarks by that little turn of speech. He did not look as though he suffered from one of those nicely classified complexes, so that the initiate could determine at a glance that the timid of speech were internally conceited and the self-confident preys to a gnawing and unconquerable inferiority.

"And why didn't you go through Italy?" asked Miss Vulliamy.

"Fascists. They wouldn't let me. And I was told

it would have been very unpleasant if I had got there. I had been, you see, sufficiently ill-advised as to make some public utterances against that—as I think—confounded mountebank, Signor Benito Mussolini.”

“Don’t you like him? I think he’s such a fine man,” said Mrs. Dawe.

“Oh,” exclaimed Miss Vulliamy, “I have the most passionate admiration for him. Look what he’s done for Italy.”

“Yes,” boomed Sir Lothar, “look. Muzzled the Press. Destroyed personal freedom. Made Italy the most military country in Europe.”

“I don’t agree, Sir Lothar. I think the Duce’s work is fine.” Miss Vulliamy was roused. “He has made Italy an organised, efficient country.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Dawe, “the last time I was there the Naples-San Giovanni express was only half an hour late. Quite a record.”

“... he had to destroy liberty to get things done the right way. He had to muzzle an antipathetic Press,” said Miss Vulliamy.

“I must confess,” said Mr. Roxborough, “that when the *Corriere della Sera* became a Fascist organ, I shed a tear. The best paper in Europe reduced to a Government propaganda sheet.” He waved his hands in the air, and sipped

his tea. "Ah, Lady Damaris," he said, "caravan-borne. There is nothing like it. Nevertheless," he continued to the circle at large, "it is strange that, in an age of which we boast as enlightened and free, and which, I am told, quite a large number of persons hope is being made safe for democracy, whatever that may mean, we should have returned to the system of dictatorships. Italy, Spain, Poland."

Sir Lothar brought down his great fist on his knee with a crash.

"Are you comparing the tyrant Mussolini with that great man Estella?" he cried. "Estella has never paraded and postured as Mussolini has done. He has worked quietly. Done everything with the smallest possible fuss. And he had, if anything, a harder task before him in cleaning up Spain than Mussolini had in Italy. . . ."

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Dawe, "he made everyone who held a position under the Government be in their offices on a certain day, under pain of losing their jobs. And so those who had half a dozen sinecures had to lose all but one. So simple. So clever of him."

". . . and he knows when to retire," said Sir Lothar. "He has said that as soon as his work is done he will retire and live as a private individual. None of the big talk of Mussolini. None of the

clap-trap. Now can one imagine Mussolini as a private individual? ”

“ Mussolini,” said Mr. Charlecote, in the hope that a little flippancy might kill this semi-political futility, “ is like a cream horn. Ideas simply burst out of him at all points, without object, control, or decorum.”

“ Estella,” said Sir Lothar, ignoring him, “ is a great man. Or so I think.”

“ Cincinnatus,” murmured Mr. Roxborough.

“ But he hasn’t retired yet,” said Lady Bernice.

“ No,” echoed Miss Vulliamy.

“ It is not yet time,” said Sir Lothar, “ but he will. After all, his actual period of dictatorship was very short. The directory did not last long. He reassembled the Cortes as soon as he was able.”

“ But what Cortes? Rather a packed house. And, anyhow, Mussolini isn’t dictator any more,” said Miss Vulliamy. “ I think he is one of the greatest men of our time.”

“ No, he’s Prime Minister, and holds half the portfolios of the Cabinet. Foreign Affairs, Interior, War, Marine, Air, and so on. Dictator in all but name. I don’t know how it’s tolerated. . . .”

“ England would never stand it,” put in Mrs. Murat-Blood.

“ My only comfort is that he must be riding for a fall. I hope it will come before he has ruined Italy

irreparably. I don't deny that he has done a lot for the country. But he doesn't know where to stop. All this talk about a Mediterranean empire and revived Roman glories . . ."

"The most complete blah," said Mr. Charlecote rather wearily, but still determined.

"I suppose he's got megalomania. They all get it, it seems to me," said Sir Lothar.

"Of course," said Mrs. Dawe, "Estella is a gentleman, and Mussolini isn't. That accounts for so much, I think."

"Possibly," said Mr. Roxborough, "the militarisation of Italy is in a sense a threat to the peace of Europe, but will it come to anything? Except perhaps a war with Serbia."

He took a small, twisted cake from a dish of friandises.

Mr. Charlecote smiled at Miss Jewell, who was sitting alone and neglected behind Lady Damaris.

"Oh," said Lady Bernice, "there can't be another war."

"No, no; terrible," said Mrs. Dawe. "I remember . . ."

"I don't know," interrupted Sir Lothar. "Why not? Italy is heading for it. Of course, given that Mussolini has moulded the whole nation to his will, what is going to happen when he's dead? I suppose

someone will get him sooner or later. He can't go on having miraculous escapes from assassination for ever. And there must be plenty of his countrymen ready to strike, even though he has filled the Lipari islands with political exiles. Has a dictator's code ever outlived him? Mussolini's régime will go to pieces like Cromwell's."

Lady Athaliah, who had been showing no interest in the discussion, suddenly spoke.

"Ha!" she said. "What about Cromwell's heritage of Puritanism? It crops up everywhere. . . ."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Murat-Blood, "it is constantly astonishing to see how, in England and America, Puritanism, degenerated into hypocrisy, survives. . . ."

She had to abandon her theme shortly, because Lady Athaliah would interrupt her remarks by saying: "Pah!" loudly, and, as Mrs. Murat-Blood thought, rather offensively.

"Do you really think there will be another war, Sir Lothar?" said Lady Bernice. The sorrow of the world was hers.

After all, thought Mr. Charlecote, what could it matter to her? The last war could not have affected her much.

"Of course there will be another war," said Sir Lothar, "Lots more. Why should mankind abandon

such a well-established and exampled habit? Nevertheless, we are gradually but inevitably working towards world-unity, and have been, since the first few families decided to live together and became a tribe. It is a prolonged and somewhat sanguinary process."

"But economically," said Mrs. Murat-Blood, "war is unsound. Everyone loses. Nowadays, when everything is a question of £ s. d., war is absurd. It is too expensive a luxury."

"And besides," said Mr. Charlecote, "if my neighbour's dog annoyed me, and I climbed the wall and murdered the brute, it would be thought highly reprehensible. I should have sued him. There is a different law for nations."

"Nevertheless," said Mr. Roxborough, "war will go on. Human nature cannot be balanced on credit and debit sheets like figures, or belief in an unbiased tribunal, or the mutability of nationalities."

"Yes," said Mrs. Dawe, "and it is fatal for trade. Except for the neutrals, of course. They told me that in Spain during the war . . ."

Mr. Charlecote came to the conclusion that Mrs. Dawe had the greatest genius for side-tracking of anyone he had ever known.

"There," cried Miss Vulliamy, "you have it. We

talk about trade, which is only competition, and peace in the same breath. It is a paradox."

Nobody took any notice of her, though she felt she had announced an eternal truth.

"What about the League of Nations?" twittered Mrs. Dawe, and fixed her beady gaze on Sir Lothar.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Murat-Blood. Her voice was big with meaning. Lady Damaris whispered to Miss Vulliamy that Mrs. Murat-Blood was a leading light of the League of Nations Union.

"Powerless," said Sir Lothar. "Powerless. Or so I think. What can it do if its decisions are flouted?"

"Lord Cecil was saying, when he was down here the other day . . ." began Lady Damaris, and stopped, seeing Mr. Roxborough wave a dainty hand.

"Perhaps," he said, "perhaps if the Anglo-Saxon races could unite, and police the world . . ."

"No," broke in Mrs. Murat-Blood, "that is meeting a lie with another lie. The League will win yet. We are called idealists, Utopians, apostles of the unpractical and impracticable. We are only beginning yet . . ."

Mr. Charlecote had an awful fear that she would say "my" League.

" . . . but one day peace will come." Mrs. Murat-Blood waxed enthusiastic. "And through the League. Or something greater, born of the League.

And people will turn to each other . . . oh, not in our time, Lady Bernice . . . and say : ‘ Why didn’t we think of this before ? ’ ”

“ ‘ We are afar with the morning, And the suns that are not yet high,’ ” murmured Mr. Roxborough. Lady Damaris smiled at him. “ After all,” he added, “ it is not a new idea. Podiebrad of Bohemia thought of it, and Henri IV. He designed what he called the Christian Commonwealth, with fifteen dominions, composed of five successive and six elective monarchies and four republics.”

“ It is a tomfool idea,” said Lady Athaliah suddenly.

Lady Damaris caught Mr. Roxborough’s eye again. She seemed to have a message for him. He realised that Lady Damaris wanted to cause a diversion, and was invoking his aid. He sketched a figure in the air.

“ Poor League of Nations,” he said. “ C’est magnifique, mais ce n’est pas la paix.”

Mr. Roxborough was rather pleased with that, and mentally filed it for future use. No conversation could withstand that sort of remark, thought Mr. Charlecote ; perhaps now politics would die, and he would be able to talk to Sir Lothar about art. Lady Damaris laughed gently. That was the kind of phrase she liked. All this talk had been well enough,

but what she liked were cut and self-sufficing phrases that she could quote later : " Mr. Roxborough, the Roxborough, you know, perhaps you have been to Clarehaven, where he has such lovely things, was sitting just where you are now, and talking about the League of Nations, and he said," etc. Sir Lothar had hardly given her a phrase yet.

" Ah, delicious, Mr. Roxborough," she said, and offered Sir Lothar some more whisky, which he refused.

" Perhaps, then," she said, " you would like to see the rose-gardens. They have been very much admired."

She annexed Mrs. Murat-Blood as well, and Mr. Roxborough followed slowly. He wondered where the princess was. She seemed to have disappeared in the confusion of Sir Lothar's arrival, and he had not seen her since. He sighed gently, and, his hands clasped behind his back, brought up the rear of Lady Damaris's procession. Mrs. Murat-Blood was quite willing to go on talking to Sir Lothar. She wanted to ask him some questions about the status of women in the Mycenaean civilisation. Sir Lothar was a very interesting man ; she was glad she had come to Pagnell Bois.

Lady Athaliah stumped off to her tower without throwing a word to anyone, and Lady Bernice came

over and sat down by Mr. Charlecote and Miss Vulliamy. Mr. Charlecote was looking at Miss Jewell. The snake on Miss Vulliamy's bosom stirred.

"What a stimulating talk we have had," said Lady Bernice. "But I don't think I quite agree with anyone."

Lady Bernice could never talk when there were many people present. She liked a small, manageable audience.

"I think," she said, "and I am sure you will agree with me, that the only hope as regards the ending of wars lies in the reunion of the Christian Churches. I am sure that was what Henri IV had in mind when he sketched his Christian Commonwealth. The spiritual supremacy, I mean. Give back to the Church her old authority, and I am confident that eventually mankind will see God."

So that, thought Mr. Charlecote, was the way Lady Bernice's mind worked. And what exactly did she mean by seeing God? He got up and went over to Miss Jewell. Miss Vulliamy's eye followed him.

Dympna, he thought, was really looking charming in that thin, tawny frock.

"Dympna," he said, bending over her chair, "you are delightful. Come and walk in one of the less famous parts of the garden with me."

Miss Jewell looked anxiously around to see

whether she were likely to be wanted, but Mrs. Dawe had joined Lady Bernice and Miss Vulliamy.

“ . . . it is not,” Lady Bernice was saying, “ as though England would ever become a priest-ridden country.”

“ Like Italy was,” said Mrs. Dawe.

And that, thought Mr. Charlecote, was the way Mrs. Dawe’s mind worked, hopping from country to country ; a sort of animated Cooks’. That was all they did here ; their minds ran about on the surface of things, like water-spiders on a river. They never got anywhere.

Miss Jewell smiled at him and got up.

“ Is there,” asked he, “ anywhere where no illustrious person has planted a tree, or walked in the morning, or defaced wood or stone with his initials ? Because, if there is, let us go there. I don’t care for following in the footsteps of the mighty. Let us make some grove famous for ourselves.”

They sauntered slowly off, away from the cedar and the lake. Out of the corner of her eye Miss Vulliamy watched them go.

Miss Jewell found Mr. Charlecote’s mild conceit charming. As they passed the tower, Mr. Charlecote saw Lady Athaliah’s figure at an upper window. She shook her fist at him and grimaced. He pretended not to see her, and turned to Miss Jewell.

They went for a little way in silence. Then Miss Jewell said :

“ I know a funny little arbour, down beyond the orchard. No one ever goes there. I don't think anybody famous has ever been there before.”

Mr. Charlecote marked that “ before.” He rather enjoyed it. No one had taken much notice of him so far, and he was glad that Dympna had not forgotten that he had a name.

“ Dear Dympna,” he said, “ let us go there.”

Miss Jewell led the way down past the mulberries (one of them planted by Prince Rupert, it was said), through the little pleasance where Lady Mary Wortley Montague (the Jeunes had, of course, Pierrepont blood) had sat and distilled some of her more pungent phrases, across a corner of the West Drive, and along the dull, red wall of the orchard. Beyond, there was a coppice of larches. As they passed through it, they could see to the left down a long glade. At the end was a white eighteenth-century temple, rather battered now and sad. Miss Jewell indicated it to Mr. Charlecote.

“ We won't be far from the haunts of the great,” she said. “ There Amanda Lady Rakeshame was found in the arms of a Great Personage. She was the late earl's first wife. An actress. It was a great

romance. There is a Romney of her in the dining-room."

"Dympna," said Mr. Charlecote, "if you show me another retreat of fame, if I see that impish look in your eyes again, I shall kiss you instantly. I shall probably do that in any case," he added.

Miss Jewell had a delicious feeling that she was behaving not quite nicely. She led the way out of the coppice, and across a stretch of grass to a little harbour, grown over with an attenuated pink Rambler and budding Clematis.

They entered, and sat down.

Mr. Charlecote took her beautiful hands in his.

"Odd, plain, lovely little Dympna," he said, "I am in love with your long, thin nose, and your big mouth, and your red hair, and your thick, black eyebrows, and the colour you have put on your cheeks."

"Oh," said Miss Jewell, "fancy your noticing!"

CHAPTER VI

Lady Bernice, after announcing her belief that mankind would one day see God, paused and let her gaze linger for a reverent minute on space, as though she expected to have an instant, if private, revelation of the deity.

Mrs. Dawe said nothing, and Miss Vulliamy, most of whose thoughts were concentrated on Mr. Charlecote and his escape with Miss Jewell, did not listen with much care. She felt unreasonably angry. She told herself that it was absurd ; it made no difference to her whether Mr. Charlecote were with Miss Jewell or no. He was a nice young man, of course, but . . .

“ . . . so wonderful,” was saying Lady Bernice, “ that God should have given us knowledge and consciousness of Him.”

Miss Vulliamy was aroused. She could not tolerate religion. She hated and resented it. All her anger, displaced from Mr. Charlecote, fell on what she was in the habit of terming the god-idea. Knowing she was going to be rude, she began to speak.

“ Not at all wonderful,” she said. “ Mankind is

always exceedingly proud of his inventions. Especially when they give him a sense, not less comforting for being fictitious, of security. Nobody likes the idea of extinction or responsibility for their actions. If they did, of course, the world would just quietly stop. But they might as well have the courage to face it, instead of inventing improbable gods and theologies on whom their misfortunes can be blamed and of whom they can demand, and quite possibly expect, redress. Rubbish."

Lady Bernice wanted to say something searching, something that would vindicate Christianity, if no other religion, but for the moment she could think of nothing.

"Oh, but don't you think . . ." began Mrs. Dawe, but was submerged by the lava of Miss Vulliamy's eruption.

"I have always found it peculiarly entertaining to picture the birth of the first religion, the eldest child of fear. First, let us say people are afraid of a thunderstorm. They want it explained. The first genius has an idea. The god is angry. . . ."

"I believe we shall have thunder to-day," said Mrs. Dawe, unafraid, and hoping to side-track the talk again.

Miss Vulliamy was beyond so mild a check.

"How, they ask, can the god be placated? By

doing such-and-such, says the first genius, who has some pet plan of his own. Or perhaps the god-idea is born of all their minds, and then comes along the genius, who sees this is a way of ruling. They invent an after-life to lay the spectre of death. But then they must invent a hell, too, to bind people to their service. It's very simple. You have a whole theology, a whole science of priestcraft, a theocracy, in no time."

Faintly Miss Vulliamy realised that she was thrashing a very dead donkey, but she could not help it. She comforted herself that for Lady Bernice it was a healthy animal in the prime of life.

"That surely is all very well for the primitive religions, but not for Christianity," said Lady Bernice, rallying.

"I am coming to that," said Miss Vulliamy impatiently.

"What very bad manners she has," thought Mrs. Dawe.

"And then some idealist sees that the fear of the people that gave birth to god can be put to a jesuitical end, and forged into a weapon to enforce a doubtless wholesome set of morals. And that, after all, is what all the great religions have done. Christianity, perhaps, more thoroughly than others, and more hypocritically."

"Miss Vulliamy!" Lady Bernice, although she could not gauge the precise nature of Miss Vulliamy's attack, felt nevertheless that something sacrosanct had been assaulted.

Miss Vulliamy realised that she had allowed her tongue to run away with her, but Lady Bernice looked so exactly like a startled sheep that she could not stop. She was in full spate.

"Fear," she said, "the greatest power in the world. You're afraid of death and afraid of life. Afraid of being of no consequence at all, of being extinguished like a flame; afraid of being responsible for your own actions. Fear, fear, fear. You live and breathe it. So do we all. It destroys us and makes us go on living. Fear and the reproductive instinct (which, since it offers a loop-hole of escape from extinction, is a child of fear) make the world go round."

"Fancy," thought Mrs. Dawe, "telling a Jeune that she was of no consequence at all."

Lady Bernice said nothing. Miss Vulliamy was, of course, her guest. Miss Vulliamy gasped a little, and looked at the two hostile faces.

She got up.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I've been behaving abominably. I . . . I don't feel very well. I think I'll go . . ."

"Perhaps it is the thunder," suggested Lady Bernice, for the second time since lunch. "You felt it before tea, I remember."

That, Mrs. Dawe considered, was very kind of her, after the way the girl had been behaving.

"No," said Miss Vulliamy, convinced that her conduct was beyond excuse, "I have been saying what I thought. It was unpardonable."

She turned from them, looking very young and gauche, and walked away across the lawn.

"Well, really," said Mrs. Dawe, "dear Lady Bernice, I am . . ."

Suddenly she saw Mr. Roxborough standing a few yards away. He had returned from the rose-garden without their noticing, so taken up had they been with Miss Vulliamy. Mr. Roxborough smiled sadly at them. He was wondering where in the world the princess could be.

"That is Merrice Vulliamy, isn't it?" went on Mrs. Dawe. "The one who writes those extraordinary books?"

"Yes," said Lady Bernice, "she was brought here in the first place by Mrs. Stebbing. She stayed with them at the Court for a week-end, and they found her charming. But it is, I suppose, a mistake to invite these . . . new intellectuals."

Mr. Roxborough gesticulated.

"Don't let her disturb you, dear Lady Bernice," he said. "I have only heard the end of Miss Vulliamy's speech, but it occurred to me that really she only represented a triumph of mind over manners."

Lady Bernice smiled graciously at him. He felt that he had supplied the necessary light touch.

"I remember," said Mrs. Dawe, "that my dear husband once had to review a play of hers. It was put on as a Sunday night show by one of those theatrical clubs, because it was banned by the censor and so of course could not be performed on any other day. The only parts of it that were intelligible were indecent."

"Indecent, Mrs. Dawe?" said Lady Bernice. "I hadn't noticed anything like that in Miss Vulliamy's writing. Nor blasphemous, either." She fingered her rosary, which was made of wood from the Mount of Olives. "Just gibberish, I thought, myself. I read *Pelican Chain*, you know."

"*Pelican Chain*?" repeated Mrs. Dawe. "And you didn't think it indecent, Lady Bernice? Why, it is veiled indecency from start to finish. That part about flagellation . . ."

Mrs. Dawe broke off on a rising note. Mr. Roxborough fingered his tie, straightening the gold ring.

Now that Mrs. Dawe mentioned it, he had noticed one or two little things.

"My dear husband," said Mrs. Dawe, "said that it was only a step removed from James Joyce."

Mr. Roxborough raised his eyebrows.

"But surely, Mrs. Dawe, many people (I cannot remember who, but wasn't Bennett one?) said that Ulysses, although indubitably very obscene, was the greatest literary achievement of realism of the century!"

"That cannot excuse it," said Lady Bernice. She had risen, and was preparing to leave the shade of the cedar. "I hope you will forgive me. I must go and see that the flowers are sent off to the church for to-morrow. The gardeners will pick such impossible flowers if they're left to themselves. Imagine, scarlet carnations and George Dicksons for the high altar."

Lady Bernice, obviously still shaken, departed.

"I am afraid Lady Bernice is very easily shocked," said Mrs. Dawe, "though Miss Vulliamy did give her rather a dose, didn't she? Very rude, I thought. Perhaps she will grow out of it."

For a space Mrs. Dawe and Mr. Roxborough surveyed the agreeable stretch of lawn and the distant trees in silence. Mr. Roxborough's eyes swept the terrace and windows, and kept a sharp

watch on the drawing-room door. Mrs. Dawe wondered whether Mr. Roxborough ever travelled. She was thinking of an opening remark, when Mr. Roxborough said :

“ Ah, here comes the general. He has been over to the Court to see the Stebbings. Old comrades-in-arms, you know, the general and Colonel Stebbing.”

Mrs. Dawe looked round to see the general coming across the lawn from the terrace with a peculiar gait. He seemed to release his whole body from his shoulder at every step.

“ Well, Tresmand, and how is Mrs. Stebbing ? ” asked Mr. Roxborough.

The general sat down, puffed once or twice, and mopped his face on his handkerchief, glancing quickly at Mrs. Dawe.

“ Ah, I am sorry,” said Mr. Roxborough. “ Mrs. Alberich Dawe, General Tresmand.”

The general rose and shook hands with Mrs. Dawe, who smiled in a watery way. Of course, she had heard the whole story of firing on the natives. She was not quite sure whether she approved or condemned. It was so hard to judge these cases, and so difficult to get at the real facts.

“ Mrs. Stebbing’s very well. She asked to be remembered to you, Roxborough,” said the general. “ I can’t think what’s come over Stebbing. Letting

his son leave the army and go into a motor business. A decent young fellow in the Guards, and now he's going to go and mess about and sell cars or hire them out or something, like any Tom, Dick, or Harry . . ." He broke off and snorted.

Mrs. Dawe suddenly thought the general was rather pathetic. He seemed only to be an old man who ought to be playing golf, and not at all like the infamous slaughterer of inoffensive natives incited by cranks who were probably in the pay of Moscow. And yet he wasn't at all old really ; just middle-aged. She became at once very broad-minded.

"But perhaps, general, young Mr. Stebbing's inclinations are more towards business. After all, nowadays, everyone does what suits him, if he can."

The general flushed a dark, heavy red.

"Interested in business? Oh, I daresay. But the lad's a pacifist. Says war's an out-of-date institution, and he won't stick in the army another day. Says he'll leave the country the moment there's another war. Stebbing's son. And yet the boy's not a coward. I know he's not a coward. I've known him all his life. Couldn't be a coward. He's Stebbing's son in his obstinacy. There's no moving him. I have an idea Mrs. Stebbing's on his side. Of course, she lost two sons in the war, so I suppose there's some excuse for

her being against it. But I can't understand it. Not at all."

"But surely you aren't an advocate of war, general?" said Mrs. Dawe, in a low voice.

"We have a pacifist staying here now, Tresmand," said Mr. Roxborough. "Sir Lothar Marienwurmchen, you know."

"The man who digs up things all over the place? Supposed to have a lot of influence one way and the other, I'm told. I met him once in Egypt. Cranky sort of fellow, I thought. Of course, I'm not an advocate of war, Mrs. Dawe. I think it's a terrible thing. Terrible. But people have got to fight."

"Here," said Mr. Roxborough, "comes Sir Lothar himself. We will see what he has to say."

Up the slight slope came Sir Lothar, Mrs. Murat-Blood, and Lady Damaris, who presently performed introductions. Mrs. Dawe at once told Sir Lothar what the general had been talking about.

"For the life of me," said the general, as she finished, "I can't see who's going to fight the next war."

"There, Sir Lothar," said Mrs. Dawe.

"There'll be no lack of recruits in the next war," boomed Sir Lothar. "At least, I think so."

"Oh, do you?" said the general, out of humour.

Lady Damaris wondered why everyone was

discussing peace and war to-day. It was very tiresome. Out of the corner of her eye, she observed Lady Cleone leaning over the rustic bridge and crumbling bread into the water. There were no swans or ducks.

Mrs. Dawe thought that Sir Lothar was quite right.

"No," she sighed, "the world doesn't alter much."

"Because," went on Sir Lothar, "there is no such thing as inherited memory."

He paused for a moment. Mrs. Dawe bent her mind to unravel this. Mrs. Murat-Blood crossed to her chaise-longue and began to collect her papers.

"If there were," said Sir Lothar, "war would have died out long ago. But each generation comes to it fresh. If they could see it with their fathers' eyes they would never take up arms again. But they have to learn their lesson. There will not be another war just yet. Not until a generation has grown up that knew not Flanders."

Mrs. Murat-Blood, who attributed half the trouble of the world to phrase-makers, shuddered at Sir Lothar's last statement.

"Not until the war is merely another red slaughter reduced to black and white on a printed page. When a thing is historical, it ceases to be human, so it seems to me," Sir Lothar ended.

"I must confess," said Mr. Roxborough, and cleared his throat to give himself time to form his sentence, "that when any new struggle threatens, as, for instance, the recent Chinese trouble, when we so nearly went to war, I derive considerable comfort from reading, let us say, Gibbon, where in the space of a few lines are related forgotten slaughters and wars of no mean magnitude. For instance, the thousands of men sacrificed by the Emperor Mauricius to the fury of the Avars, because he would not pay their ransom. Or, to leap the centuries, the Turkish prisoners Napoleon massacred in cold blood because he could not feed them and his own men as well. It restores one's sense of proportion. One sees that the struggle on which one is embarking is of as little import as those old catastrophes."

"It's much the same for the killed," said Mrs. Dawe. "Poor things."

"You can prove anything's of no importance, Roxborough," growled the general. "You can make your mind so open that nothing stays in it, as somebody said. You must not look ahead or behind. Above all in war. You must only see what is immediately before you. You must want to win. You must not think that, whatever happens, your victory or your defeat will be a little ink on a page of a musty history. Why, if everyone started thinking

about things like that, how could there ever be any war ? ”

“ Quite,” said Sir Lothar.

“ But it couldn’t work like that,” said Mrs. Murat-Blood. “ People have got to believe in things.”

Lady Damaris was dismayed at the acrimonious turn this conversation was taking, as the others had done. What was the matter with people to-day ? Perhaps it was the threatened thunder. The thought came pat to her need.

“ I am afraid, general,” she said, “ that you and Mrs. Murat-Blood won’t be able to go and see Tunstal Abbey by moonlight, as you intended. I hear distant thunder, and I think it will rain this evening.”

“ That’s a pity, Lady Damaris. A great pity. I’m afraid you’re right, though. Birds are flying low. Perhaps to-morrow.”

The general was rather relieved that Lady Damaris had changed the subject. He had an idea that he had made a fool of himself ; that fellow, Marienwürmchen.

“ Oh,” said Mrs. Murat-Blood, “ I had wanted to hear the nightingales so much. And I have promised to address Lady Bernice’s club in the village to-morrow evening.”

Lady Damaris was not going to lose the general and Mrs. Murat-Blood that evening, if she could help it. She wanted to settle them to bridge, and so ensure that four people at least, and possibly eight, would be occupied. If they quarrelled over that, that was not her affair.

"It is a pity," she said, "but I really think the weather is too uncertain to-day. Perhaps you and the general could stay over Monday, and we could all go then."

Mrs. Murat-Blood recited a list of her Monday engagements. All the committees in London seemed to have chosen that day to meet. Mrs. Dawe wondered how Mrs. Murat-Blood was going to get anything to eat.

"Well, perhaps you can come down later in the summer for another visit, dear Mrs. Murat-Blood," said Lady Damaris. "The nightingales will be singing better then."

She began to edge the party towards the house. She always liked to have a good hour to herself before the dressing-bell went, and she liked to have her guests well in hand. Pagnell Bois was not a come-and-go-as-you-please house.

Mrs. Dawe seemed her most likely victim.

"If you want a real treat, Mrs. Dawe, you should get Mr. Roxborough to show you round the gallery.

He knows far more about our pictures than we do."

Mrs. Dawe murmured something, and smiled at Mr. Roxborough, who bowed. Sir Lothar was told where he could find some Egyptian antiquities, some collected by Lord Rakeshame, and some given to the Jeunes by the late Lord Carnarvon, but he stayed with Mrs. Murat-Blood.

After a little, Lady Athaliah, at the window of her tower, looked out on to an empty lawn.

CHAPTER VII

“Dear Valodya.”

The words stared up at the princess from the wide, blue-tinted sheet of notepaper. Sitting at the table in the window, she could see out over the gardens, where, beyond the flame of the roses, the may burned with a fierce, white fire. Below her on the lawn the party was at tea ; the sound of their talk came up to her gently, almost rhythmically, like the sea, now with a foam of laughter, or the spray of an unusually high note.

The princess did not take tea. She wished the sun would set. The day was so brilliant, her companions so drab. She sat rubbing the vert amande feather of her pen softly along her chin. The muscles of her hard, clear face were relaxed, and it looked tired.

She tore up the paper, and took a fresh sheet.

“Dear Valodya,” she wrote again.

In her mind she saw a picture of her polyglot Russian sitting on the terrace of the Villa at Cap Ferrat, one leg crossed over the other, the beautifully creased white flannel lustrous as metal in the sunlight. That was how he would read her letter,

looking at the sun-soaked bay of Villefranche. One should never picture the circumstances of its reception when one is writing a letter. One should concentrate rather on raising up in the imagination of the recipient a vision of one's own circumstances. She shut her eyes to the picture, and wrote swiftly, without hesitation. She had large, firm writing, and never scamped letters, forming each completely.

"It is sad here. Sad and mocking. I have visited the Jeunes for so many years. I do it to remind me of my age. I must keep my sense of balance. For where is the point of continuing to look young, if one is led to believe in one's own appearance? One is robbed of one's own triumph. I didn't have my face trimmed and massaged into shape, I don't keep a stock of fard, or hang on to my enthusiasms and illusions, for that. But, alas, now the Jeunes are very old. The frosts are on them. And, by rights, they should be on me too. Even Lady Damaris is giving way at last. But I, I cannot be old. I cannot watch. I must act, always.

"Here I cannot pretend to believe the things you have said to me. That you said to me just so few weeks ago, at Tamaris, that morning we watched the sun come up, and the day wake in the rade. There is no June in my heart. Perhaps it is that there is no June at Pagnell Bois. Here they are all

FROLIC WIND

so many fantocchini, jerked about on God knows what strings. Perhaps I shall try to give them a little tug now and again. . . .

“ But I am readier to believe that I too am a puppet, dancing about awkwardly and stupidly. I doubt. I admit to myself that I doubt. Do you remember those lines that Richard Oke wrote when he was staying with us last year? Was there something narquois in them ?

dans son faisceau cueille le Sagittaire
une flèche de lumière
et l'encoche et la décoche ;
elle pénètre la chèvrefeuille
dans l'embrasure de la fenêtre
et ricoche
de ta chevelure empanachée ;

(et ma main est arrachée
qui s'accroche à ton sein ;) et soudain
je sais que je suis amouraché
d'une fantoche ;

et j'ai un petit sourire sournois
que personne ne voit ;
c'est que je crois connaître
tant de gens charmants
qui sont amourachés

de fantoches.

“ I found it last night, and it depressed me. I wondered, is that feeling that comes with the dawn and is put away in sleep, after a night devoted to

Venus, the truth? Are we fantoches, you and I, Valodya? Write to me and tell me we are not. I shan't believe it about you yourself. But I want to believe it in theory. You are so young. . . ."

The princess broke off, and gazed out of the window. She did not see the people under the cedar, or the flame of the distant flowers. She swept her dark hair back from her forehead, and smiled at the sky with a return of her gay defiance. She felt better after writing that letter. In her experience, things that were stated in more or less punctuated sentences lost their terror and discomfort. Still with that wide, serene smile she tore the letter in small pieces and threw them into the basket. She knew now that she had never intended to send that letter. Often, she wrote letters like that.

"Dear Valodya," she wrote on a fresh sheet, "I am going to Biarritz to stay with my cousins in the middle of July. You are to meet me there. But we must be very circumspect.

"I have had the cafard badly in this great, echoing empty house. Full of people, and yet quite empty. I know what you would say. 'Ah, ma chère, faut prendre un purgatif.' You are always so practical.

"I am sending you a cheque.

"Dear Valodya," she wrote, and signed the

FROLIC WIND

letter with a big, firm A. She wrote out a cheque and enclosed it in the envelope.

“And now, my dear,” she said aloud to her reflection in the mirror, “a little sleep before dinner is the thing for you.”

CHAPTER VIII

Mr. Charlecote and Miss Jewell returned from the harbour separately.

Miss Jewell came straight back to the house, and hurried up to Lady Damaris's room to read to her for an hour. They were reading *Portrait of Clare*, and Lady Damaris constantly interrupted her to identify some place or house, from the fruits of her experience of Worcestershire, when staying at Madresfield or Hagley.

"We must ask Mr. Francis Brett Young down here," she said. "No one has ever written about Pagnell Bois and our country quite like that."

Mr. Charlecote returned past the glade, where stood the little temple, along the wall of the orchard and then branched off to the front of the house, and so came round by the front door. He had an idea that Lady Athaliah would be watching at the window. She would have seen Miss Jewell, who had gone back along the terrace.

As he walked, he smiled and sang happily to himself a little song with no particular tune. He became conscious of this, and thought suddenly :

"That is what *Dympna* is. A nice little song, with no particular tune."

CHAPTER IX

When Mr. Charlecote came down dressed for dinner he found only Sir Lothar Marienwürmchen in the drawing-room. Sir Lothar's evening clothes gave the effect of being constructed on a scale even more bulky than that of their wearer. They did not seem in any way part of him, but rather a disguise he was for the nonce affecting. A young Englishman, more than usually well known in Paris, and who wears out daily the pavement of the rue Cambon, had said once that, until seeing Sir Lothar, he had had no idea that it was possible to look vulgar in evening clothes. He may have been actuated by malice, but had immediately given his double-breasted dinner-jacket to his concierge.

Mr. Charlecote liked Sir Lothar. He had, of course, been predisposed to like him. Like the rest of the world, he found Sir Lothar a contradiction. A German Jew, who cared nothing for money ; but then, of course, he had never lacked it ; the late Mr. Marienwürmchen had originally seen to that in the early days of the Rand. An antiquarian, concerned enormously with the political future of

the world. A bachelor, who frankly coveted children, but who had publicly stated that he did not feel justified in bringing them into the world in its present condition. Mr. Charlecote, given himself, at cocktail time, to loose phrase-making, thought of him as a personal misanthrope and a general humanitarian, an optimist of the future and a pessimist of the present. He contemplated the great hulk of a body as he sipped the Jeunes' excellent cocktail. For, of course, the cocktails at Pagnell Bois were excellent. Lady Damaris had not only the common knowledge that drinks are essential, but that rarer wisdom that bad drinks are worse than none at all.

Sir Lothar, for his part, looked out of the window. During the afternoon the sunblinds had been down, and Mr. Charlecote had not noticed much of the immense, dim room. Now he saw that it was a mixture of every age and every taste. It was easy to find objects and perspectives which were frankly hideous. But the whole gave a pleasing impression ; the room had an eclectic air. It seemed to say : "There is something of every age here. Whether you like it or no, it was the best that age could produce."

Sir Lothar turned suddenly upon Mr. Charlecote and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"You paint, don't you?" he asked.

Mr. Charlecote admitted it. Sir Lothar's manner forced him to admit rather than affirm it.

"What do you paint?"

Mr. Charlecote mentioned the "Sleeping Saint." It was in that year's Academy. The Daily Mail had bought it for the nation.

"I haven't been to the Academy. I seldom go. I prefer the little exhibitions. There you may find art." Sir Lothar did not say this at all rudely. He said it with the air of making a discovery.

"But," he went on, "have you had anything hung abroad? That's what counts. To get known outside England."

Mr. Charlecote had had a picture in the autumn Salon.

"Well, I'll go and look at that picture of yours. I've heard people speak of it. I expect they've seen far more in it than you ever thought of putting there."

Mr. Charlecote toyed with the idea of denying this charge, of intimating that people had as yet only observed the tithe of his intent. He came to the conclusion that Sir Lothar would not be deceived.

"You are very perceptive," he said. "Yes, they have. It quite takes my breath away sometimes."

Sir Lothar nodded. His hand moved gently to and fro on Mr. Charlecote's shoulder.

"I know," he said, "they always do it. It reflects, you see, on their own intelligence. They say to themselves: 'I was the first person to see that this picture is lustful, or has an underlying chastity, or expresses vacillation,' or whatever it may be. If you care to come and see me in London, I'll show you some things I have. I've some Cretan things that are superb. No proportion, but incredible vitality."

Mr. Charlecote said he would love to, and took another drink.

The princess came into the room.

"You must be Sir Lothar Marienwürmchen," she said. "I'm so sorry I didn't see you this afternoon. I was not well, and went to lie down. I am Princess Rosencrantz-Guildenstern. I have been dying to meet you. They tell me you talked so interestingly this afternoon. I am sure you will agree with me that we shall return to slavery. The only true liberty."

Sir Lothar bowed to the princess, who accepted a long-stemmed star-powdered glass from Mr. Charlecote.

"Slavery?" said Sir Lothar, and raised his Gargantuan eyebrows. "Liberty? There are no such things."

"Oh, yes, of course," said the princess, "but I

meant practical slavery, you know. Serfdom. Having slaves and masters. Then every owner must be a statesman, must think for his people. He won't let his property deteriorate. What does he care for the workers ? ”

The princess smiled dazzlingly at Sir Lothar, and then at Mr. Charlecote.

“ We shall not go back to slavery, princess,” said Sir Lothar ; “ we never go back to anything. We go forward. Slowly, but indivertibly, forward.”

“ Oh, but, Sir Lothar, there's nothing new under the sun, you know,” said the princess.

“ Nothing new. But infinite variations on the old theme. The world never plays quite the same tune twice. It has new instruments, which alter it ever so slightly. Like an old air played on a harpsichord and a pianoforte. It is the same, and yet not the same.”

The princess puckered her brows in thought.

“ That is a great thought, Sir Lothar,” she said at length. “ I shall remember it. The world, for ever playing the old tune on new instruments. Instruments that ever increase in accomplishment, until one day . . . What then, Sir Lothar ? ”

Sir Lothar shrugged.

“ Perfection ? ” asked the princess.

"Can you have the finite in an infinite world?" asked Sir Lothar.

This was beyond the princess's depth. It sounded like a paradox. Surely the world was finite?

"Oh, Mr. Charlecote," she cried, "look out of the window. That beautiful effect of light through the cedars. Like black lace on the green scarf of the lawn. You should note it."

And then to Sir Lothar:

"Do you know Biarritz? My cousin has practically commanded me to go and stay with her there. She married a Bourbon, and has behaved ever since as if they still reigned. Of course, they do in Spain and Luxemburg, but not, alas! in the Two Sicilies."

Sir Lothar did not know Biarritz. He thought that he had never before met a Frenchwoman who was an Anglo-snob.

"I wondered whether perhaps you would be going there. So many people do. I can't quite make up my mind about going, but if I knew some interesting people would be there . . ."

Lady Damaris entered the room with apologies for her lateness. She refused the cocktail proffered by Mr. Charlecote. Hard on her heels came Miss Vulliamy and the general. They appeared to have been discussing orchids on the way down.

"We used to grow them," said the general.

“Managed to keep the houses heated during the war. Got a bit of coal on the quiet. Le Système D., you know. Then the gardener was conscripted, and there was no one to look after them, and they all went to rack and ruin.”

Miss Vulliamy was in green georgette ; the sort of green, thought Mr. Charlecote, that you see in the heart of a flame. He came over and spoke to her, and observed that it was draped over a lamé tissue of a bluish-gold. She wore one long earring with a green stone in it. The general kept on looking at it, as though he were on the point of asking her whether she had forgotten to put on the other. Mr. Charlecote decided that Miss Vulliamy could wear green in the evening.

Mrs. Murat-Blood came into the room with an air of conscious punctuality born of the committee-room, and almost simultaneously Mrs. Dawe and Mr. Roxborough entered from the terrace.

Mr. Roxborough wore a monocle on a broad, black ribbon, which he only put on in the evenings. Mrs. Dawe was in indeterminate blue. Her pale hair was silvered by the bright lights.

Lady Bernice and Lady Cleone came in together, looking for all the world, thought Mrs. Dawe, like witches in a fairy-tale.

“Oh, everybody here?” said Lady Bernice.

"I'm sorry. The Vicar rang up just a few minutes ago to ask me something about the service to-morrow."

Lady Bernice never telephoned herself. She sat beside the instrument, while her maid spoke for her. Her telephonic conversations were thus somewhat long drawn out.

Lady Damaris scanned the assembled faces.

It was at once the pride and inconvenience of Pagnell Bois that numbers were disregarded. People were asked by the sole criterion of whether the Jeunes wanted to see them or not. If the resulting party happened to be composed of ten women and one man, well, that did not matter.

"Cecily isn't here," she said. "She isn't often late."

"Where is Cissie, Mr. Charlecote?"

Lady Athaliah's voice came from the terrace doorway. Her words were followed by a distant roll of thunder—the thunder Lady Damaris had prophesied. Lady Athaliah was encased in stiff, violet satin. Mrs. Dawe, looking round suddenly, and seeing her, startled by her words and the sudden thunder, gave a little gasp. The old lady seemed to be immensely impressive, standing there against the blue summer sky, the light dancing on the deliberate folds of her dress.

"Ah, I was afraid so," said Lady Damaris. "You and the general would get a wetting if you went to Tunstal, Mrs. Murat-Blood."

She could not quite conceal the satisfaction in her tone.

"You were going to hear the nightingales, Mrs. Murat-Blood?" asked the princess. "Ah, I have so often been kept awake by them. In the Roussillon. When I was staying with my cousins, the Croys—the Belgian Croys, of course."

Mrs. Dawe, not to be outdone, had apparently also been kept awake by the exuberant nightingale; in Geneva: "... at a villa of the Rothschilds, out by the Ariane, quite near the old Hôtel National, you know, where the League is."

Lady Damaris would ordinarily have been rather put out that anyone should think the nightingales sang louder or sweeter anywhere than at Tunstal. But, as it seemed to make the excursion of the general and Mrs. Murat-Blood even less desirable, she was content.

For a few minutes conversation flew about the room like a butterfly, alighting here and there for a moment, and flying on elsewhere.

Mr. Roxborough said quietly to Mr. Charlecote that Lady Athaliah in her purple dress was like a Flemish picture. Her hard, wrinkled face and

jutting chin and steady eye needed only the coif to complete the resemblance.

The princess said something to Miss Vulliamy about her single earring. Lady Bernice offered Mrs. Murat-Blood another drink. Sir Lothar, unbidden, lit a cigarette.

Almost instantly Jerrold announced that dinner was served.

The dining-room at Pagnell Bois, unlike the drawing-room, was the product of a single epoch. With the exception of the portraits that lined its walls, it was Victorian. The walls themselves were covered with a thick, brocaded paper of a hot, intense red ; the curtains, heavily draped, were of plush of a deeper, more malignant shade. They were secured by mighty cords, thick as hawsers, twisted of gross black and crimson threads. The furniture, of a massive strength which seemed to argue a conviction that the Victorian era was sempiternal, was of rich red-brown mahogany. The spirited convolutions and capricious beadings which adorned it seemed to be the ponderous concessions of majesty to humour, if not to wit. The table, immensely wide and long, was burdened with silver candelabra and épergnes, writhing with tortured mythology and denatured flowers. Set at unexpected angles were frilled horns and twisted trumps, in which crimson

and pink roses stood self-consciously, in pathetic emulation of their more exact metallic neighbours. The cutlery and service were of gigantic proportions and lustre. Salt-cellars big enough for bird-baths, pepper-pots like minarets, and mustard-pots of voluptuous curves, clustered in archipelagos at short intervals ; menu cards in silver holders soared here and there. Each picture on the walls was surmounted by a little hooded lamp, which struck a curiously modern note. There was a Sargent of Lady Damaris's husband, in uniform, with a big, grey beard.

Lady Damaris was at one end of the mahogany acre of table, and Lady Athaliah at the other. Sir Lothar was on Lady Damaris's right, and Mr. Roxborough on her left. Mr. Charlecote and the general were marooned about half-way down either side—male oases in a desert of women.

Several persons in a strange dark-blue uniform deposited huge slices of cantaloup before each diner. Mr. Charlecote longed secretly for sugar and ginger, but weak-mindedly took pepper, which he disliked. Lady Athaliah disregarded the melon.

Lady Damaris extracted from Sir Lothar and the general a promise to play bridge afterwards. Midway down the table, Lady Bernice obtained a

similar concession from Mrs. Murat-Blood and an enthusiastic acceptance from the princess.

Mr. Roxborough waved a flaccid hand towards a big portrait, surmounting the mantel, which was composed of about a couple of tons of peculiarly ugly marble.

"Surely," said he, "that is very like the portrait of Charles the Ishams have at Lamport?"

"It is identical," said Lady Damaris. "Theirs, of course, is the copy."

Mr. Roxborough surveyed the picture with consideration. It was assuredly not the original. Every year he made a similar remark, and every year found that Lady Damaris had grown no wiser.

"Undoubtedly," he said.

The cantaloup was removed.

The door opened and Miss Jewell came in. She looked flushed and rather untidy. Mr. Charlecote reflected that it didn't suit her. Dympna ought always to be rather stiffly, precisely dressed.

"I'm so sorry, Lady Damaris. I'm afraid I'm dreadfully late. No, no melon, thank you. I have such a headache. I was lying down."

"I expect it's the thunder, dear." Mrs. Dawe's voice was a symphony of sympathy. "I have a headache, too."

Half a dozen headaches appeared round the table. The princess was in agony.

"I think," she said, "that it is persons of sensibilité who suffer from thunder headaches. Their nerves are so taut and sensitive that they respond to the electrical currents in the air at once."

Miss Vulliamy too had a headache.

Mrs. Dawe recalled being prostrated by a most terrible headache when two storms met in the mountains, above the Brienzersee.

"I lay on a couch, near the window (not too near, of course), and watched the thunderhead breaking, quite speechless with pain. The colours were magnificent."

"Ah," said Mr. Roxborough, "a wonderful spectacle."

"I have not got a headache," announced Lady Athaliah. "I love storms. There will be a splendid storm to-night. I shall watch it from my tower."

"My sister loves to go out on the roof. I think it is very dangerous," said Lady Bernice.

"Isn't there a lightning conductor?" asked the general. "Most necessary. Very afraid of thunder. Never stay near my clubs if I'm caught on the golf-course. Or put up an umbrella."

Mr. Charlecote and Mrs. Dawe both thought of the massacred natives. Mr. Charlecote smiled.

"Lightning conductor?" said Lady Athaliah, digging at her consommé froid. "No. I'm quite safe."

Sir Lothar's voice boomed down the room.

"A man was killed just by me during a thunderstorm in Athens," he said. "The lightning struck a tree, too. There was an image of it stamped on his shoulder afterwards. Most curious."

The consommé froid was removed.

Mrs. Dawe shuddered.

"Like a sign of the wrath of the gods," said Miss Vulliamy contemptuously.

Lady Bernice crossed herself rapidly, concealing the mediæval process under the table as much as she was able. Miss Vulliamy swept the company with a mocking glance. She was still out of humour.

Mrs. Dawe had seen a horse struck in the Bavarian Tyrol, above Garmisch.

"We had only just got out of the carriage," she said. "The lightning was playing down to the road all round their hoofs."

"Lobster, please," said Mrs. Murat-Blood.

Miss Jewell took salmon. Mr. Roxborough refused fish.

Mr. Charlecote tried to catch Miss Jewell's eye diagonally across the table. She seemed unwilling to let him.

"I'm not afraid of thunder," she said suddenly. "I think it is rather exciting. Although my head aches." She left off eating her salmon, which was presently removed.

"Ah, yes, I know," said the princess. "One is nevertheless a trifle exalté."

Nobody took any entrée.

"It is really too close to eat," said the princess. She swept back her hair from her brow (magnificently white against the black hair, thought Mr. Roxborough) with a jewelled hand. She sipped her Pape Clément.

Mr. Roxborough asked for some soda-water.

For a moment conversation died, while cold chicken was offered. Lady Bernice glanced at the clock. It was not twenty past. Mrs. Murat-Blood was surprised at the Jeunes' food. It was of the sort that her husband had always called Carltonic, as a generic term for all hotel fare.

The princess took only some salad, on an inconvenient little crescent-shaped plate at her side.

A louder peal of thunder shivered the hot silence, and everyone began to talk at once.

"I always think . . ." began Mr. Roxborough.

"It seems to me . . ." said Lady Damaris.

"The other day at the British Legion . . ." announced Mrs. Murat-Blood.

"To-morrow is the feast of St. . . ." started Lady Bernice.

"I wonder . . ." said Mr. Charlecote, and stopped.

"How thrilling it is," said Miss Vulliamy.

"Oh, la, la !" said Lady Cleone.

"My dear husband, in Ostpreussen . . ." observed Mrs. Dawe.

"Among the Maoris . . ." Sir Lothar was launching information.

"Listen," said the princess unnecessarily, hand uplifted.

"If there are any elms . . ." muttered the general.

"Seven," said Lady Bernice, who had seen the flash and had been counting.

"Oh, my head !" said Miss Jewell, and got up.

Then everyone apologised for interrupting everyone else. Lady Athaliah laughed.

In the ensuing lull :

"Nearer," she said, with relish, and speared a cold potato and a bit of orange from among her salad.

"I think, if you will excuse me, Lady Damaris, I will go up and lie down again. It will be better when the storm has broken," wailed Miss Jewell.

Lady Damaris and the princess murmured something sympathetic, and the men rose as she went out, Mr. Roxborough looking very protective.

The chicken was removed

Lady Athaliah, Lady Damaris, and the general were the only people who had any of the bombe glacée. Lady Damaris did not eat hers.

The windows stood out brilliantly in a flash of lightning.

"Fork," said Lady Bernice, in awed tones.

"Very dangerous," said the general, tugging at his moustaches.

"We usually just have summer lightning," said Lady Damaris.

"It will be a fine storm," said Lady Athaliah.

Mrs. Murat-Blood thought she would have a little bombe glacée after all.

In a very elegant way Mr. Charlecote suppressed a yawn. Miss Vulliamy observed him, and, a moment later, was compelled to dig her thumb up below her own chin. She managed it less elegantly than Mr. Charlecote.

Lady Damaris did not feel at ease about her guests. Of course, you could not expect people to talk interestingly during a thunderstorm. It affected everybody in one way or another. She had hoped that Miss Vulliamy's remark about the wrath of the gods might lead Sir Lothar to say something instructive. Indeed, he had begun to tell them something about the Maoris just after that thunderclap.

She felt sure it would be an exposition of his favourite theory that they were of the same race as the ancient Peruvians. She turned to him.

"You began to say something about the Maoris, Sir Lothar. Won't you tell us what it was?"

Sir Lothar's answer was drowned in another and longer roll of thunder.

"Ten," said Lady Bernice.

"Farther off that time," offered Mr. Roxborough, graciously inclining his head, as though confirming Lady Bernice's mathematics.

Lady Damaris felt that she would like to give up the unequal battle. Being accustomed to self-control, she recognised that this failing spirit in her was only a sign that she too was affected by the unusually sultry atmosphere and the thunder in the air. She pulled herself together.

The bombe glacée disappeared, and mushrooms were offered clustered in large numbers on extremely small and shapely bits of toast.

"The mushrooms are very early, aren't they?" asked Mrs. Murat-Blood.

"Yes. They won't last long, I expect," said Lady Damaris, "and then we shan't have any more till September."

"They grow," said Miss Vulliamy, "at the change of the moon."

Mr. Charlecote seized upon this.

"So you've heard that too, Miss Vulliamy? I remember last year, when I was painting at Blandford, an old gaffer explained to me that they were governed by the moon."

Mrs. Murat-Blood looked tolerantly at him.

"I have often found that they are much bigger and better when the moon is full," said Miss Vulliamy. "You know, you nearly always find that there is something in these old superstitions."

"The moon is full to-night, and the mushrooms excellent," declared Lady Athaliah.

"All lore is founded on hard sense," said Sir Lothar.

Lady Damaris hoped again. But Miss Vulliamy and Mr. Charlecote kept the talk for a few minutes to themselves, comparing experiences of the lunar susceptibilities of mushrooms.

The disappearance of the savoury and the arrival of dessert distracted Sir Lothar's attention. He selected a peach.

Mr. Roxborough leant forward and addressed Miss Vulliamy. He leant forward with the merely practical object of being able to see her down the table, but he managed his inclination in so courtly a way that it was, in effect, a salute.

"You mentioned your theory about the mushrooms

somewhere in Pelican Chain, didn't you, Miss Vulliamy?" he said.

Miss Vulliamy nodded, and smiled quite sweetly at Mr. Roxborough.

"Miranda was a country girl, you see, Mr. Roxborough. I have tried to make her an expression of the uneducated superstitions and inherited convictions of generations of countryfolk."

Mr. Roxborough, on his turn, nodded and smiled at Miss Vulliamy.

Lady Athaliah chuckled.

"Miranda was seduced under the full moon beside the swelling mushrooms, which, like Miranda, were influenced by the moon," she said.

"I had no idea you had read my book, Lady Athaliah," said Miss Vulliamy.

"I read a great deal," said the old lady, shaking her shoulders so that high lights bounded about the purple satin. "I have quite a library in my tower."

Mr. Roxborough watched his hands perform a little manœuvre in the air with the black ribbon of his monocle.

"As we are all the flower of our ancestors' superstitions and beliefs. As all our thoughts are the logical development of their thoughts and actions," he said.

Lady Damaris looked at Sir Lothar. He did not

challenge Mr. Roxborough's statement. He seemed to be enjoying his peach.

"No," said Mrs. Murat-Blood, "we are free. We are not bound by chains of inherited prejudice. If we are, we must break our chains. The individual can act of his own volition and will ; he need not be only a marionette, jerked by the strings of the past."

"Oh, surely," said the princess, "sometimes people are influenced by what their forebears were."

"Seems to me as natural as family likenesses. Throwbacks, and so on. Nobody questions them," said the general.

"Ah, no," said the princess. "When I was young I was supposed to be the image of Diane de Poitiers, who is my aïeule in the tenth degree."

She smiled dazzlingly upon the company. Miss Vulliamy, wondering if she realised what she had said, endeavoured to remove all mockery from the smile that insisted on curling her lips.

"To a certain extent the individual is free," boomed Sir Lothar, "as the rose is free. It can put forth shoots to north or south as it pleases and conditions decree. It can produce ten blooms or one. So he is free. But whether the rose is red or yellow, double or single, scented or no, is pre-determined."

"Surely," said Mrs. Murat-Blood, "that is purely physical. Black man or white. Ugly or beautiful."

"The scent," murmured Mr. Roxborough, "is the soul of the rose."

The princess smiled at him.

"I think," said Mrs. Dawe, "that your rose-garden is the very loveliest I have ever seen, Lady Damaris." And so, between them, she and Mr. Roxborough struck the subject of conversation dead. "Not even in Bulgaria, among the rose-fields, have I smelt a more concentrated perfume."

"Very delightful, very nice," said the general. "I must send you my scented white rose when it is perfected. It should be ready next year. I hope you will allow me to call it the 'Lady Damaris Mocque-Stallyon.' The only scented white rose."

"Isn't the 'Marcia Stanhope' white and scented?" asked Lady Bernice.

"Almost white and very nearly scented," said Mr. Charlecote. Most of his brain was occupied in wondering how Dympna was.

Lady Damaris began to collect eyes round the table. She had rounded up Mrs. Murat-Blood, the princess, Mrs. Dawe, and her sisters, but Miss Vulliamy was watching the distant play of lightning over the hills. At last she roped her into the magical, carefully ignored circle, and rose.

Sir Lothar opened the door.

When the procession, closed by Lady Damaris and the sweeping train of Lady Athaliah's purple frock, had gone, the four men moved up the table and sat down around Mr. Roxborough.

Sir Lothar sat silent, staring moodily at his port. Mr. Roxborough blinked through the ruby liquid against the light, and Mr. Charlecote sipped rhythmically and absorbedly. The general gulped his down and took a second glass. Neither he nor Mr. Charlecote was appreciating his port, Mr. Roxborough thought ; the general because he drank it like beer, and Mr. Charlecote because he consumed it without any attention at all, and just because, at this stage of the meal—well, one did have port. Mr. Roxborough moved the decanter, of Jacobean cut-glass, round in a formal little circle at the end of the table.

"For a woman's table," said Mr. Roxborough, "this is excellent port. I believe it was given by the Duke of Wellington, who, I believe, still has a sort of annual tribute from Portugal, granted originally to the first duke."

"An interesting survival," said Sir Lothar, looking up suddenly.

Everything here had been given by somebody, thought Mr. Charlecote.

"He gets sherry, too, I believe, lucky fellow," said the general.

Mr. Charlecote considered the silly talk they had been hearing ; every subject abandoned or stultified just when it was becoming interesting ; like lances, shattered at the moment of striking.

There fell a long silence, except for the thunder which talked to the hills.

Mr. Charlecote began to get restive. He thought of Dympna, up there in her dark room, waiting for her headache to go ; of the pack of women in the drawing-room, waiting for them to join them ; of Lady Athaliah, waiting for the storm to break, to go up to the roof of her tower ; of the general, waiting until he could decently have a fourth glass of port.

The thunder rolled nearer. The general was just reaching out his hand for the decanter when Sir Lothar said suddenly :

" Shall we join the ladies ? "

Mr. Roxborough, who considered that the rôle of host was his, looked a trifle put out. The general changed the motion of his hand and fumbled in his pocket. He produced a gold cigar-case. Mr. Roxborough held up a restraining hand.

" No cigars, Tresmand. No cigars. It is the one prejudice our hostesses have. Cigarettes as much as you like."

Feeling he had re-asserted his position of authority, he smiled benignly and rose.

“ Good,” said Sir Lothar. “ You must keep a few prejudices, or you can have no constant beside which to measure your standard of proportion.”

They filed out of the room.

“ I think,” said Mr. Charlecote, “ I will go out for a little walk before the storm breaks. I feel I want some air. Will you make my excuses to Lady Damaris, Sir Lothar ? ”

Pure contrariety had prevented him from asking this of Mr. Roxborough. He fled from the three men, who continued their way along the long corridor towards the drawing-room.

CHAPTER X

Miss Jewell left the dining-room and hurried upstairs to her room. It was large, but, being practically a cube, had the appearance of a band-box. It had, of course, in former days been occupied by Lord Chesterfield, who had written some of his letters from Pagnell Bois.

Miss Jewell slipped off her dress, which no one had noticed, although it was her best, and made of a peculiarly beautiful shade of oyster beige. She lay down on the bed. Then she got up again and searched about on her dressing-table for some eau-de-Cologne and a fresh handkerchief. She soaked the handkerchief and laid it on her forehead. Then she turned out the light and lay down again.

The tall, oblong windows framed a sky of dim summer blue and the crests of the poplars beyond the south lawn. She lay and looked at it, while the lightning played hide-and-seek across it. The thunder rang in her head so loud that it seemed to be almost a tangible, visible presence that filled the room and beat on her aching temples.

Gradually, as she lay there, she became more used

to it, and her thoughts began to weave patterns independent of the storm. She thought of Mr. Charlecote : Alexis. She wondered what Lady Bernice would say if she knew about the doings in the arbour. Or Lady Damaris. She hoped that Lady Cleone would find her cards, in the drawer of the Empress Josephine's table, when she wanted to play her game of patience afterwards.

Alexis was charming. She liked his funny, humorous eyes, and his mouth, that seemed always on the brink of a smile. And when he did smile at you, it was like being given a present. It was rather a mocking smile, it was true ; but perhaps he was right in mocking things and people. He had made her think differently about a lot of things that afternoon. He seemed to have such definite, clear-cut opinions about things, and about what he wanted, that it made her feel as if she had spent all her life with a mist over her mind. That was his phrase, too.

"Dympna darling," he had said (darling !), "Dympna darling" (Miss Jewell could not resist repeating the words to herself), "almost everything you say is just mist of your mind. Only every now and then there is a rift and the sun comes through. You h a v e got a sun, you know."

And he liked the name Dympna. She had always thought it rather odd, and therefore not a very nice

name. But he liked it, just because it was odd. He thought she was odd. He had said she was like a Hans Andersen elf (whoever heard of an elf having a long nose ?), and ought to live in a house made of sugar, and he would come and see her and paint her portrait in icing. What nonsense !

Looking back on the afternoon, Miss Jewell could not remember his making love to her at all. He seemed just to have talked a great deal of nonsense, all tangled up with cleverness, and kissed her and stroked her hair and held her hands. It had not been Miss Jewell's idea of love-making at all ; there had been altogether too much play of humour about it. Miss Jewell had always understood that love-making was not a witty pastime, but nearer to tears than laughter. And yet it had undoubtedly been love-making. Miss Jewell felt that she didn't understand it in the least, but she had come away feeling very glad she had red hair and silvery eyes and natural black eyebrows and beautiful hands.

He had said her profile was hard and cold, like the image on an intaglio. Miss Jewell, mindful of the Jeune intaglios, all reposing on black velvet in the drawers of a Florentine cabinet in the second drawing-room, was not sure whether she were pleased or not. And then suddenly he had kissed her, and said :

"I always hated ears till I saw yours. They are so immoderately small."

Miss Jewell had never thought of ears as objects of beauty or ugliness, any more than she would have thought of a beautiful tongue, but just as ears.

She had not said much herself, but just agreed with Alexis or laughed at his jokes. As, for instance, when he had said :

"To understand my attitude towards life, you must understand my attitude towards apples. I choose an apple for its rosy skin and its gloss, but I never think of eating it, because I do not like apples, and consider them nasty. I am fascinated by non-essentials. So the lustre of a name, the glitter of an exterior, catches my imagination. I never know anything *à fond*. But the world is so full of essentials that there may even be too many. Too many necessities are no feast at all."

Miss Jewell had not had the remotest idea whether he were joking or not. Once, with a flash of penetration, it had occurred to her that Mr. Charlecote might be afraid of having indigestion if he ate apples, but liked them all the same.

Then they had talked about Lady Athaliah, and Miss Jewell had said :

"She's evil. Like an old spider, carting things off

into the web of her tower, and coming out again and watching, watching always."

He had looked at her quite seriously then.

"D'you know why the Jeunes keep so young?" he asked. "The youngest of them must be over seventy."

"Just seventy. Lady Cleone," answered Miss Jewell.

"Yes. Don't you ever feel terribly tired? When you've been with them, I mean," he went on.

Miss Jewell considered. She didn't know. She often felt tired, certainly. But . . .

"It's a shame," he burst out; "they suck your vitality. Your youth. Your energy. All four of them. Lady Athaliah, perhaps, least. But the others are just vampires, taking all your strength. It's a damned shame!

"You must get away," he added.

Miss Jewell said nothing.

"I think it's dreadful to see the old battenning on the young. You see it everywhere. Old mothers and their daughters, not letting them marry. Old men and young wives. Old people, hanging on like leeches, keeping 'so marvellously young, my dear,' on vicarious energy. Old women in night-clubs, with lizards. You must get away."

Unless Alexis took her away, Miss Jewell did not

quite see how that was to be accomplished. Now she thought about it, she realised that the Jeunes did batten on her.

And once Mr. Charlecote had said, out of the blue:

“Standards are designed so that we can fail to live up to them with a clear conscience, because it is far more creditable to know how something should be performed perfectly, than to achieve it in a competent but mediocre manner.”

Miss Jewell had always been taught that she should do her best, and this only confused her. Even now, it seemed rather unreal, but probably he was right.

Miss Jewell's thoughts flew at a tangent to the way Alexis's hair curled over his ears. Unruly and crisp, like wire ; or like the tendrils of clematis that embraced the wooden arbour.

Miss Jewell sat up suddenly on her bed. The sodden handkerchief fell to the floor with a sulky plop. Was she—could she be—in love with Alexis ? Was this being in love ? When she couldn't keep her thoughts quite straight, when they would keep running off to consider the way Alexis's hair grew, or the way he had kissed her hands ? It was all so different from what everyone said and wrote about it. Miss Jewell was agreeably disappointed.

Lightning flashed at the window, and thunder

pealed a very little after it. Miss Jewell did not notice it. She was thinking. She sat there for a long time thinking. She seemed not to reason, but to be lost in a deep pool of pure thought ; thought so pure that it followed no straight road, but just spread out around and around her like a cloud. She was in love with Alexis, Alexis was in love with her. . . .

Slowly she sank back on to the pillows, and her thoughts span round and round in concentric circles of decreasing radius, whirling round still and round and lessening to a little whorl of thought of love and Alexis and someone called Dympna, which was presently submerged by the dark flood of sleep.

Miss Jewell dreamed.

Magenta hoops and emerald arcs withdrew across her mind like a curtain, revealing a scene where people moved and spoke. Dympna was there too, herself, and yet not herself. Somehow she lived in a tower and had a mad mother. Alexis was there too, and he was asking Dympna to marry him. Miss Jewell wanted to say yes, wanted Dympna to say yes, but, of course, Dympna, who was thinking of her mad mother, could not do that, and went on saying no. Miss Jewell could have cried out with mortification. She wanted to explain that she wasn't Dympna at all, and that, far from having an imbecile mother, she was an orphan. And Alexis was urging Dympna

to marry him, and asking her why she went on saying she wouldn't and couldn't. Finally, he got cross, and said he supposed he wasn't good enough, and Miss Jewell tried to shout at him, and tell him it was all a misunderstanding. But he seemed not to hear, and the other Dympna, the dream-Dympna, just shrugged her shoulders, because, of course, it did not matter what Alexis thought her reasons for refusing were. She did not want to confess to the mad mother. And Alexis got extremely annoyed, and said all sorts of rude things to Dympna, who seemed to be losing her temper too, because there were little spots of red on her cheeks. (Or was that make-up, Miss Jewell wondered?) At last Dympna interrupted Alexis's flow of words, and to Miss Jewell's grievous hurt said :

"Why, I wouldn't marry you if you were twenty dukes !"

Such a funny phrase, thought Miss Jewell ; the housekeeper used it.

Twenty dukes in the robes of their rank walked solemnly into Miss Jewell's dream, doffed their coronets politely to Dympna, and passed on.

"Did you notice," said Alexis, "that eleven of them had the Garter, four the Thistle, and three the Patrick? And the other two were minors."

And then his figure and that of Dympna melted

away into drooping convolutions, as faces do sometimes in trick pictures on the movies, and Miss Jewell found herself having a long talk with the housekeeper, to the constant accompaniment of a tom-tom and a flashing green light.

“ . . . and I said, Miss Jewell would never do a thing like that, but her ladyship wouldn't have it, seeing that she'd seen you both at the time, and that even if there hadn't been any lightning, there was a moon.”

“ Thank you, Mrs. Perrins, thank you, Mrs. Perrins,” murmured Miss Jewell, in some sort of cross-rhythm to the beat of the tom-tom and the light. “ Thank you, Mrs. Perrins, thank you, Mrs. Perrins.”

“ And what I always say is, trust an old dog for a stony road.”

“ Thank you, Mrs. Perrins, thank you . . .” Miss Jewell broke off, for the housekeeper had suddenly turned into Lady Athaliah, who said, grimly :

“ In the middle of the bed,” and then walked away, murmuring :

“ Peccavi, peccavi.”

“ Peccavi,” echoed Miss Jewell, and woke.

There was moonlight, and she was chilled about the shoulders in spite of the thunder warmth. She pulled the eiderdown over her and looked out of

the window. A roll of thunder was dying away over the hills, but a little tenuous lightning still tore the blue sky. She lay quite still for a little, her mind moving slowly, emptied of the dream, but not yet fully tenanted by consciousness.

Rose from below the window a little, thin tremor of sound. It was fragile and gentle. Miss Jewell did not pay much attention to it. It became clearer. It was a tune. It was fluting.

Miss Jewell listened. The single, frail strand of sound grew and wove itself into a pattern ; it poised and fell and thriddled its way about the dim room and into Miss Jewell's immoderately small ears, and so to her quiet brain, arousing it. After a little Miss Jewell's brain produced a name, that rose like a bubble to its surface. Schubert. Schubert's "Serenade." It was being played on a flute, under her window.

Miss Jewell's brain leapt to life. She pinched herself. No, she was not dreaming. She jumped out of her bed and ran to the windows. She looked down at the terrace, very dim and shadowy in the mixed light of the moon and the summer night. For a moment she could see nothing. Then the moon glimmered on the flute as it stirred.

There, sitting on one of the stone pedestals that uprose from the balustrade of the front terrace, was

a figure. The legs were crossed and deep in shadow, the body from the waist up silhouetted against the silvery lawn. Miss Jewell's uncomplicated mind had thoughts of fauns and Pan. Her imagination faltered at the black clothes the god was wearing. A gleam of light from a shirt-front illumined the face. Alexis, of course. He had his legs twisted round the shaft of the pedestal, and was crouched over the flute. Miss Jewell listened behind a fold of the heavy, green, velvet curtain.

It was incredible ; she, Cecilia Jewell, serenaded. No, of course, it was not Cecilia Jewell who was being serenaded, but Dympna. Dympna, who would disappear when Alexis went, and never come back. Dympna, who did not really exist at all outside Alexis's imagination. Dympna, a dream.

The serenade ended at last ; a low voice called out from the figure perched on the pedestal :

“ Dympna ! ”

Miss Jewell did not answer. There was a pause, and then the flute took up its song again. It was much more lively now ; a sugary, gay tune, but louder, as though determined to awaken her. One of the waltzes from the Czardasfürstin, thought Miss Jewell. The common tune danced in the night air like a fairy. It reminded her of the lagoons at Venice, that thin, cold sound across the warm night.

Suddenly it struck her that Alexis had not told anyone that he played the flute, or that he had one with him. The odd idea came to her that perhaps he didn't play the flute any other time, that perhaps he was bewitched. She felt rather bewitched herself. As she peered at his crouching figure round the curtain, she had a momentary illusion that he had horns and shaggy legs . . . Pan again.

The vision vanished in a moment, and she saw Alexis quite clearly as he raised his face. The playing stopped, and the voice called again :

“Dympna !”

“Yes,” breathed Miss Jewell, so softly she doubted if he would hear.

He sprang down from the pedestal and came immediately under her window.

“Dympna,” he said, “come down and out into the garden. It's a magic night, and the storm won't be here yet awhile.”

Magic night, she thought, that had been her idea. Almost automatically, she said :

“Oh, but it must be so late.”

“Only ten o'clock. That's nine really. Summer time, you know. Do come, dear Dympna.”

Miss Jewell hesitated. Her headache seemed to have gone in her sleep, and it was a lovely night.

She waved to him, without saying anything, and ran back into the room.

She turned on the lights and started putting her hair straight, in front of the great, bevelled, mahogany-framed mirror, which would never swing at just the right angle. Outside on the terrace the flute took up another air ; light and dancing and gay.

She cooled her wrists and temples, which were burning, in water, and rubbed them with eau-de-Cologne ; she powdered her hot cheeks, where the blood raced beneath the remnants of Miss Vulliamy's rouge, and turned to the dress she had flung on the big armchair. No, not that ; not oyster colour. She wanted something that was very pale, and would gleam in the shadow. Or something dark and secret, that would not show at all ? No, what did it matter who saw her ?

She took a dress of white georgette from the wardrobe. It was not very new, but that wouldn't matter in the shades of the garden. She slipped it on. It flowed down her limbs like water, moulding them closely. How long last year's dresses seemed !

Miss Jewell gave a last look at herself in the glass, and ran softly out of the room.

CHAPTER XI

In the drawing-room, when Sir Lothar, the general, and Mr. Roxborough entered, the party of women had split up into three groups. Mrs. Dawe was watching Lady Cleone, who was just laying out her patience cards on the Empress Josephine's table; Lady Damaris, Lady Bernice, and the princess were about the coffee; Mrs. Murat-Blood and Miss Vulliamy had taken their cups into the far corner, near the big pianoforte in the ornate Empire case, and Lady Athaliah was standing looking out of the windows at the darkening garden. Over the earth was a dim veil, but the wide sky above the banked cloud was lucent with a diffused radiance, as though it were a giant blue parasol interposed between the world and some hidden sun.

"What very interesting cards," said Mrs. Dawe. She was looking at the ace of spades, which had two little pictures on it, so arranged that from either end one was the right way up. Both depicted sea-fights, surmounted by legends in Portuguese. "'Tomada da Esquadra Miguelista,'" read Mrs. Dawe, and "'Derreta dos Miguelistas em

Cacilhas.' Oh, and the date's in the middle : 1833."

"Do you speak Portuguese, Mrs. Dawe?" asked Lady Bernice.

"Oh, no, but I understand it, of course. Such an ugly language."

Lady Cleone grunted, and patted the last pile of twelve nervously into place.

"I picked up a little," went on Mrs. Dawe. "I remember, years ago, when my brother and I were in Porto in October. We had been there for the vintage. One drank all day long."

While Mr. Roxborough and the general were receiving their coffee from Lady Damaris, Sir Lothar came to a standstill by Lady Cleone's table, and surveyed the cards in silence. From the other end of the room Miss Vulliamy watched him manœuvring his ponderous bulk. She thought that he did not stop; he hove to.

Mrs. Dawe picked up an ace of hearts. Lady Cleone, who wanted to get on with her game, was rather annoyed. She made spluttering noises, and fidgeted with the base row.

"'Desalojamento dos Rebeldes das Linhas do Porto,'" read Mrs. Dawe, with a slow, elegant diction, her thin mouth pouting in carefully accented Latin O's. "And 'Convenção d'Evora-Monte.' Wherever did they come from?"

Lady Cleone seized the ace from her flaccid fingers, and, replacing it, started her game.

"I think our father got them from the Duke of Saldhana, when he was ambassador here," said Lady Bernice. "My sister has always used them for her patiences."

"The magnificent Saldhana," murmured Mr. Roxborough.

"I have some nice cards, too," said Lady Athaliah, from the window. "With pictures on them."

Mrs. Dawe thought how disconcerting was her habit of ignoring a conversation, and then suddenly inserting a remark from some distant part of the room.

Lady Cleone muttered to herself as she handled her cards.

"Twice four are eight. Yes, there it is. Dear, dear. No, ten to begin with. What nice flowers marigolds are. Oh, yes, there it is, under the three. People don't appreciate them properly. Let me see, twice eight are sixteen. Thirteen from sixteen—yes, that wants the three. That frees the ten. This is going well. I shall have to call it Marigold . . . three and eight are eleven . . . knave . . . because it always comes out so quickly."

Mrs. Dawe smiled at Sir Lothar, and prepared a geographical remark. He noticed that she had false

teeth, and lumbered away across to the fireplace, where Lady Damaris gave him coffee.

Mr. Roxborough waved the hand not occupied with his cup.

“Your coffee, dear Lady Damaris, is delicious. Only in a few houses in England can you get good coffee nowadays. In France, it is all abominable. Even the filtre. And in Germany, unless you ask for Mocha, you are given acorns still. And the Mocha is not good. But this—ah, this has a bouquet.”

“Oh, I know,” chimed in Mrs. Dawe, “the coffee everywhere is dreadful. I remember I was quite ill in Biskra once. We had gone out to the villa of a local sheikh . . . a most elegant and cultured man . . . and we had gazelle steak and chicken . . . not plucked, but skinned . . . and stewed with dates and figs, and kous-kous, and the most appalling coffee. Quite ill. Though which it was, I don’t know.”

Mr. Roxborough’s mobile nose was still savouring the delicate odour that arose from his cup.

Sir Lothar drank his coffee down quickly and lit a cigarette.

The general moved across to Mrs. Murat-Blood and Miss Vulliamy, who broke off their conversation and looked at him with the tolerant expression

of women who for a moment interrupt a deep talk to listen to a child.

"We've not finished with that thunderstorm yet," he said. "It'll come right over us."

Lady Athaliah turned towards them.

"Yes," she said. "It'll be worse before it's better. Gott sei dank."

Mrs. Dawe, who had been vaguely floating about the room for a minute or two, approached the group by Lady Damaris.

"I think," she said, "that that is the most beautiful piano I have ever seen. It's not clumsy, like the ordinary grand. And those fascinating legs. It reminds me of one at Schönbrunn."

"Do you play?" asked Sir Lothar, before Lady Damaris could acknowledge the compliment, or tell them the history of the pianoforte.

"Oh, no, only perhaps a little for myself. Or to accompany myself," said Mrs. Dawe.

Sir Lothar nodded. So it was to sing the woman wanted, he thought; well, let her get it over. At one time he had been disturbed by his total inability to appreciate music, but had eventually come to the conclusion that he was tone-deaf, and ignored the art ever since. His archæological work having been mainly connected with Grecian civilisation, and no one having the remotest idea what Greek music

was like, he had not been much incommoded or handicapped.

"Won't you sing to us, Mrs. Dawe?" asked Lady Damaris. "Just o n e song."

"She'll sing a dozen," hissed Lady Athaliah to the group by the pianoforte.

The general, who had not heard Mrs. Dawe, said :

"Quite, quite"—loudly.

And Mrs. Murat-Blood murmured :

"Charming."

"Oh, I really don't know if I have a n y voice this evening," said Mrs. Dawe. She cleared her throat once or twice, and then fingered it, as though her voice were some secretion of matter whose presence or absence she could ascertain by the sense of touch.

Sir Lothar crossed the room in a business-like way, and began to open the pianoforte. Of course the woman was going to sing.

Mrs. Dawe fluttered here and there. Lady Damaris rang the bell, and dispatched Jerrold for Mrs. Dawe's music.

"You'll accompany Mrs. Dawe, won't you, Bernice?" said Lady Damaris.

"Well, if there is really no one else who can do it better," said Lady Bernice, looking round the room.

"Mr. Charlecote, perhaps. He is so artistic. Oh, but Mr. Charlecote isn't here."

"I'm sorry, Lady Damaris," Sir Lothar boomed from behind the lid of the pianoforte. "Mr. Charlecote asked me to make his excuses to you. He is feeling the weather, and has gone into the garden to get a little air before the storm breaks."

"Well, in that case, Lady Bernice . . . ?" said Mrs. Dawe, with a pallid smile, taking an immense portfolio of music from a footman. The two ladies crossed the room. Mr. Roxborough followed, prepared to turn over for Lady Bernice.

Mrs. Murat-Blood and Miss Vulliamy, realising what was afoot, composed their faces and smiled at Mrs. Dawe, endeavouring the while to precipitate their minds elsewhere. The general blew his nose and said something unintelligible.

Mrs. Dawe sang a song of Sinding's, that began :

"Tausend stille weisse, blaue Blumen
Stehn auf einer grünen grünen Wiese."

Lady Bernice played the accompaniment in a measured, ecclesiastical manner. Mrs. Murat-Blood, who liked the song, and had failed to banish her attention, thought she would be sick. Miss Vulliamy, her thoughts afar, remained unmoved.

Mr. Roxborough turned over the single page in an elegant way.

" . . . Warten auf ein zartes blondes junges Mädchen,"

sang Mrs. Dawe. She had one of those soprano voices that can reach higher than anyone else's has ever been before. The effect was slightly marred by the fact that one or two notes of the pianoforte were a little out of tune, and by a clap of thunder which cascaded over one of Mrs. Dawe's more pyrotechnical vocal feats.

Scattered applause greeted the end of the song.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Dawe," said Lady Damaris.

She was thinking that in a minute or two she could settle Mrs. Dawe to bridge.

The general, hoping he was doing the right thing, asked Mrs. Dawe to sing again.

"I'm sure you must have had quite enough," she said, and searched among her pile of music. She consulted Mr. Roxborough as to what she should sing next.

Lady Athaliah said :

"Well, I will bid you good night. Thank you, Mrs. Dawe. I must listen in to the Hague. There is a lecture on conchology. I am interested in the shapes of shells. And then I shall watch the storm, and hear its music."

She departed, amid murmured good nights, and pursued by a graceful bow from Mr. Roxborough, chuckling.

"I have some nice shells in my garden," said Lady Cleone irresponsibly. "Arranged round the paths . . ."

"Hush!" said Lady Damaris, and Lady Cleone returned to her patience.

Sir Lothar had moved down the room and was looking at the etching by Félicien Rops, while Mrs. Murat-Blood and Miss Vulliamy checked an undertone exchange of conversational halfpence as Mrs. Dawe's voice once more assailed the ceiling.

The "Chanson Hindoue" of Rimsky-Korsakov.

The general, gazing apprehensively out of the window, had seen a bright flash of lightning dissipate itself behind the trees, just as Lady Bernice began the accompaniment. She treated the sinuous, mock-oriental melody as though it were a fugue.

"Les rubis dans nos mines sont innombrables," sang Mrs. Dawe. "Les perles dans nos mers incalculables."

The storm unfortunately chose this moment to raise its voice, and its greater volume completely drowned Mrs. Dawe's tenuous notes. She broke down, made a false new start, and gave up with a futile gesture of her clasped hands.

There was an instant hubbub of regrets and thanks, and Lady Damaris came forward.

"Too sad, Mrs. Dawe," she said, "too sad. But

perhaps another evening? Don't you think we had better play bridge? I'm afraid conversation will not be very satisfactory. The thunder, you know."

"Oh, dear," said Lady Bernice, "I asked Cecilia to see that the tables and markers were got ready. I distinctly remember asking her after luncheon. Didn't I, Athénée? I remember you were talking about slavery or serfdom or something."

"*Jus primæ noctis*," said Lady Cleone, from the dimness of her brain, "she always talks about the *jus primæ noctis*."

"Hush," said Lady Damaris, "Hush, Cleone."

"I don't think Miss Jewell has been very well to-day," said the princess hurriedly.

"She has been preoccupied," said Sir Lothar.

"Oh, d'you think so?" asked Miss Vulliamy, quick as a flash.

"Well, never mind," said Lady Damaris, "they will soon be here."

She rang for Jerrold again, and two tables, cards, and markers were brought in. Chairs were suitably disposed.

Lady Damaris marshalled her guests and arranged the tables.

Mr. Roxborough declined to play, but the others settled down and cut for partners.

Mrs. Murat-Blood, partnered by Lady Damaris,

was set to play Sir Lothar and Lady Bernice. As they sat down, the thunder spoke again.

The general and the princess, at the other table, opposed Miss Vulliamy and Mrs. Dawe, who invariably over-called.

"Majority calling?" asked the princess, in a business-like way.

The general coughed and asked a question. Majority calling was explained to the general.

Mr. Roxborough drew a chair up to the Empress Josephine's table and asked intelligent questions about Lady Cleone's patience.

"Ah, yes, I see," he said, "and at the end you are left with eight kings. If it comes out, that is."

"Two hearts," said the princess, glancing triumphantly at Miss Vulliamy.

"It almost always comes out," said Lady Cleone serenely. "Knave and eight, are, let me see . . ."

"Nineteen," said Mr. Roxborough. "You want a six."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Lady Cleone. She wished Mr. Roxborough would play a patience of his own.

"Three no-trumps." Mrs. Dawe was at her usual tricks. Miss Vulliamy frowned.

Lady Damaris had it. Mrs. Murat-Blood laid down her hand and left the table. At the other game, Miss

Vulliamy was dummy ; the princess had doubled Mrs. Dawe.

“ A two, Lady Cleone, you want a two. See, you have it there,” said Mr. Roxborough ; and, to Lady Cleone’s relief, left her to talk to Miss Vulliamy. Mrs. Murat-Blood watched Lady Cleone moodily.

Miss Vulliamy and Mr. Roxborough went to the far end of the room.

“ I had so looked forward to meeting Sir Lothar,” said Miss Vulliamy, when they were seated. “ And now I am disappointed. He will not talk about his subject.”

“ No,” said Mr. Roxborough, “ no. Many people have been disappointed in him. He has no friends, you see. Always you will see him hovering on the edge of a society, always impermanent, as though he had never found his own people. No one knows anything about him. A very intelligent Frenchman once said of him that he put everything that was for sale into the window, and then allowed no one into the shop.”

“ That, of course,” agreed Miss Vulliamy, “ fits in with what one hears. There are a lot of stories. . . . One often finds that, from the point of view of general intercourse, it has that effect.”

“ Yes,” said Mr. Roxborough, with studied

carelessness. Miss Vulliamy glanced towards the bridge-players, who were absorbed, and broke into French undertones. It was a habit of hers when she wished to be impressive.

“ Bien entendu, aujourd’hui tout ça se dit très facilement de n’importe qui. Un peu de fard, une allure ondoyante, des façons peut-être un peu plus que paternelles avec les jeunes gens (tous les symptômes, d’ailleurs, que notre ami n’exhibe pas). Un petit dîner dans un restaurant trop fréquenté. Sans y penser l’on marche bras dessus bras dessous . . . Et le lendemain voilà déjà bien des histoires. Tout le monde est callé jusqu’au point de redevenir ingénu. Mais quand même, vous savez, il y a de petites circonstances . . . des gestes révélateurs . . . enfin, pour une femme du monde . . . ”

Mr. Roxborough curtailed a gesture in mid-air.

“ Yes,” he said, resisting the lure of speaking French himself. “ Yes, one hears these things.”

He was a trifle surprised at hearing this from Miss Vulliamy, in spite of all Mrs. Dawe had said. Not that he had any false modesty : he believed firmly that scandal would die in the birth-pangs of frankness. On the whole, he found it impossible not to avoid frankness.

“ Yes,” he repeated, so that Miss Vulliamy thought he must be about to coin a phrase, “ but

after all, dear Miss Vulliamy, something is said nowadays about every one of us. People are wretched until they have fitted each of their friends and acquaintances into a psychological pigeon-hole of some sort. And as soon as one is a little mysterious, well . . .”

But Miss Vulliamy was not to be diverted. “Thank God I can enjoy a good gossip,” she had often said to those who were surprised at her capacity for personal small-talk.

“Yes, yes, of course,” she said hurriedly, and then returned to French, which she spoke with a tolerably good accent. “Pour ma part, je suis entièrement tolérante de quoi que ce soit. Mais on ne peut pas ne pas remarquer les choses. . . . Même on m’a raconté des anecdotes épatantes de ce qu’il fait à Berlin. Il paraît qu’il s’intéresse beaucoup à la société de Kraft und Schönheit, qu’il fréquente les boîtes de nuit, qu’on le voit partout . . . originalement accompagné. Un de mes amis l’a vu presque tous les soirs chez ‘Lord Henry’ . . .”

“Certainly,” said Mr. Roxborough, “certainly. I’ve seen him there myself. Often.” And stopped in confusion.

“Oh,” said Miss Vulliamy, with a very British, intolerant intonation; and then announced unnecessarily clearly: “Mr. Roxborough thinks we

shall have a very bad storm," to Mrs. Murat-Blood, who was approaching them.

"I'm afraid so. The air gets heavier and heavier." Mrs. Murat-Blood sat down beside them.

"How odd Lady Cleone is," she said. "She has been talking to me quite sanely and consecutively, and only this afternoon. . . . But I expect you saw her."

Miss Vulliamy smiled, rather sardonically.

"Yes," said Mr. Roxborough. "Very sad. I believe she had some shock. Though I have heard that there is some hereditary strain of . . . abnormality."

"I never heard anything like that about the Jeunes," said Mrs. Murat-Blood.

"I think," declared Mr. Roxborough, "that in Lady Cleone it is attributed to a more exalted source." He fingered his pointed chin delicately.

Miss Vulliamy's thoughts flew to the portrait of Lady Cleone's mother, as voluptuous and healthy a lady as ever Romney painted.

"In a few years," she said, "we shall have arrived at the date set by Lord Rakeshame for the publication of his secret memoirs. They should be illuminating."

Mrs. Murat-Blood was relieved that she had to return to her table. She was not fond of scandal.

After all, she felt, Lady Cleone was one of their hostesses. The odd thought came to her that the name she herself bore might be regarded as not without its imperfections, but she sternly banished it.

Mrs. Murat-Blood and Lady Damaris had lost to Sir Lothar and Lady Bernice. Lady Damaris accepted the blow stoically; Mrs. Murat-Blood embarked on the new game with a furrow between her brows. She did not like the way Lady Damaris had conducted the hand.

The second table finished. Mrs. Dawe had naturally failed hopelessly to make her bid. She apologised to Miss Vulliamy, and blamed dummy's lack of support.

"Not at all," said the princess brightly, bent on draining the full cup of victory. "You should have played the queen. Of course, you over-called."

A post-mortem was performed at the table. Mrs. Dawe's mistakes were exhumed from their decent face-down graves and dissected and diagnosed one by one before her.

Unabashed, she over-called her next hand. Miss Vulliamy was soon back with Mr. Roxborough.

"Mrs. Murat-Blood," said Mr. Roxborough, "is a charming woman, and very capable. She has ruled all her menfolk, and believes firmly in a

matriarchate as the only ultimate salvation of the world. She is convinced it will come."

Miss Vulliamy smiled at him quite kindly, as though to imply that she had had no intention of continuing to talk about Sir Lothar, and was willing to let Mr. Roxborough off.

"Why should it?" she said. "Why do people always expect radical changes? They never by any chance occur. Things just go on and go on. A kitten may chase its tail in all sorts of ways and directions, but it continues to chase its tail."

Mr. Roxborough, by an effort of will, took this to be applicable to Mrs. Murat-Blood. He shrugged his shoulders, and was pondering a rejoinder when Miss Vulliamy rose.

"Mon Dieu, it is hot," she said, and wandered out on to the terrace. It seemed to her that in the distance, from the coppices to the right, she heard a sound of music; thin, gentle music, a single strand of it, blown on some elfin horn.

Mr. Roxborough looked around with a gentle sigh. Mr. Charlecote had not returned, Miss Jewell was up in her room, Lady Athaliah listening-in in her tower; now Miss Vulliamy gone, and the others playing bridge. Mr. Roxborough played only baccara. Lady Bernice was dummy at the far table, but she stayed to watch her hand played, feeling no

very great confidence in Sir Lothar's abilities. After all, it was her money as well as his.

"Six and seven are thirteen. That makes six kings," said Lady Cleone to herself. "I believe it is going to come out."

With a welcome clink of ice, a tray of divers drinks was brought in and deposited on the big ormolu table.

Mr. Roxborough contemplated for a few idle moments the portrait of Danaë Lady Rakeshame. Madame Vigée Lebrun, of course. He admired the sweep of the eyelids and the tilted chin ; impudent as a Gibson girl, he thought.

He felt a trifle bored, and picked up a volume from the piano—one of several left there by Miss Vulliamy. It was published by a press with a decorative name of which he had never heard. He read a few lines of it at random, and then quietly slipped it into his pocket for future reference. The thunder kept on distracting his thoughts. It was now a dull, ceaseless rumble that got on one's nerves, just as the incessant tom-toms in the "Emperor Jones" did. He wondered whether Lady Athaliah was on the roof, or still listening to the lecture in Dutch on conchology.

"Eight kings," said Lady Cleone, in triumph. She packed up her deck of cards and put them away.

Then she went over and looked vaguely at the princess's hand.

"Getting on nicely, dear?" she asked in a flat, monotonous voice. The princess hated being interrupted; more especially by Lady Cleone. She bade fair to lose this game. The princess hated losing.

"Having no hearts, partner?" she said. "Yes, yes, quite nicely, dear."

"I am sure," said Lady Bernice, apostle of truth, "that the general has revoked."

"Certainly not, certainly not," said the general. But he had.

The princess could bear no more. To have this dolt of a general for a partner, when one had a splitting headache, and the thunder grated incessantly on one's nerves, and there was not a man worth looking at except Mr. Charlecote, and he had disappeared . . . it was too much. Regardless of everyone else, she flung down her hand.

Lady Damaris, who had finished her game, turned and tried to make peace, but the princess was implacable.

What excessively bad manners, thought Mrs. Murat-Blood, and then recalled with satisfaction that she had always thought the princess rather bad style. Really, that blue round her eyes . . .

"I feel my thunder headache again so badly.

It is devastating," said the princess. "I won't play any more. Perhaps Mr. Roxborough will take my hand."

The general, feeling insulted, also proposed to abandon the game. Making a fool of him, he thought; it wasn't good enough; bedizened old hag.

Lady Damaris was dismayed. There was no sign of Miss Vulliamy. What was the matter with everybody that evening?

Mrs. Murat-Blood said :

"You're spoiling the game for us, rather, general."

But the players had broken up now. They all stood about in an untidy group, Lady Damaris glancing from one to another.

"I think I shall go into the garden for a little. It is really much too hot to sit indoors and play cards. Won't you come with me, Sir Lothar?" asked the princess. She held her head thrown back, and parted her lips over her even white teeth. Sir Lothar's gaze rested on their brilliance; they were beautiful teeth.

"I shall be enchanted," he said, and they went out into the garden.

Lady Damaris made the general and Mrs. Murat-Blood sit down for another game with Mrs. Dawe and Lady Bernice. It was obvious that nobody

really wanted to play, but Bernice, she knew, would be grouchy all the evening if she were balked of her bridge. Mr. Roxborough and Lady Damaris sat down together by the pianoforte.

“Now,” she said, “we can have a nice, quiet talk.”

Mr. Roxborough blossomed. He knew Lady Damaris’s powers of listening. There was a malicious story current to the effect that Lady Damaris had never interrupted anyone in all her life but once, and that when she had been told that Lady Cleone had been found tripping in the gardens at dead of night, attired in her nightgown and a sort of lava-lava of *nasturtiums* ; then :

“Lady Cleone has always been fond of flowers,” she said.

Lady Damaris hoped that the bridge would go better this time. Over-calling and revoking did exacerbate everybody so.

“Indeed,” Mr. Roxborough was saying, “I am inclined to the opinion that, alone among our modern colourists, Armstrong . . .”

And, a moment later :

“Three spades,” said Mrs. Dawe.

CHAPTER XII

The night had no darkness. As Miss Jewell came out on to the terrace there was a jagged thunder-cloud athwart the moon, but everything was dimly radiant. The very shadows seemed only to be the reverse side of some filmy fabric whose surface was light. Earlier in the evening the princess had remarked on it ; and, of course, Mrs. Dawe had been reminded of Scandinavian midnights. She and her husband had walked in Lapland, up the Torneå Elf, leaving the rail track at Jukkasjarvi.

Miss Jewell saw Alexis waiting for her. He had no air of magic now. Just a young man in evening clothes, a young man with rather a nice smile.

"Dympna, Dympna," he said, "it's lovely of you to come. Isn't the night wonderful? Can't you understand why they used to send out naked girls at the full moon to plough around the tilled lands, a charm for good harvest? There's a feeling that the moon is terribly near, and the skies low, and everything very close and watchful. Not united, but just waiting near one. You and I and the breathing earth and the moon and the stars."

Miss Jewell let him lead her round the house, past the wall of the orchard, and into the long glade by the temple.

He released her hand and danced off down the alley, fantastic in the moonlight, and rather absurd in his evening clothes. Miss Jewell laughed a little. He came back to her, and laughed with her.

"You know," she said, "when I looked at you out of the window I thought for a moment that you were Pan. Crouched in the shadow, with your legs crossed. I think I shall call you Pan."

"Poor, overworked god," cried Mr. Charlecote. "To think you lost Arcady to gain suburbia."

He took her in his arms and made her dance round with him for a few turns of a fantastic waltz. Did she imagine the tune, or did he hum it? But, of course, really each of them danced to an imagined tune, that was played in the halls of his memory; Mr. Charlecote to a wild Zigeuner air that a Roumanian friend had sung to him one evening among the pistachios and the aloes, the cypresses and the gay strawberry-trees, of the island of Lacroma; and Miss Jewell to the *Chocolate Soldier*, which she had heard one evening when there was a dance at Pagnell Bois, and she had flattened her childish nose against the windows of

the big drawing-room and listened and looked and longed.

Suddenly Mr. Charlecote stopped and released her.

"You know, Dympna, this is all mad and unreal and magical. It is a nightmare of Debussy and Dulac and the Parnassians, and a sort of cloying Dubarry scent. One of their most seductive titles. The Pipes of Pan, perhaps. Or is it some mad orient of Rimsky-Korsakov come true? And you and I in the middle of it, dressed like this!"

There was a clap of thunder, the very clap that overwhelmed poor Mrs. Dawe, in the drawing-room, as she sang the "*Chanson Hindoue*."

Mr. Charlecote and Miss Jewell laughed again foolishly.

"Come along, Dympna, let's go to the temple. Perhaps we shall see the ghosts of Amanda and her Great Personage."

And then :

"Couronnés de thym et de marjolaine,
Les elfes joyeux dansent sur la plaine,"

chanted Mr. Charlecote.

He ran his hand through his hair, and said, very soberly :

"These remnants of an excellent education, what

makes me remember them now ? Teutonic twilight in French. Poor Gallic fairy, you wear powder and mouches. If a German elf had a mole, he would call it a mole and not a grain de beauté."

In the little temple they sat down. Miss Jewell felt the welcome cool of the marble through her thin dress. She looked around ; not for the ghost of the fair Amanda, but at the shadows, and the little framed prospects of the glade seen between the pillars. The trees and bushes looked flat, like a back-cloth, like painted panels.

Alexis played again on the flute. Miss Jewell had always thought the flute rather an unsatisfactory instrument. At one time Lady Bernice had had a passion for it. There was a Leighton of her, in very well-organised draperies, on a marble seat, as a Greek flautist. She had collected Sicilian flutes and Algerian flutes, ordinary flutes and extraordinary flutes. She was wont to practise in the corner of the herb-garden, where, as a child, Miss Jewell had been sent to play. Lady Bernice had deserted flutes for religion, but the reedy, shallow sound of them ran through Miss Jewell's memory of her childhood like a pale thread.

From the little pavilion she could only see the sky over the tops of the trees. Now and again it lightened pallidly, and the thunder rolled always

dully, a mighty bass accompaniment to Alexis's fluting.

A finger of moonlight fell on his hair and was caught among the tendrils above his ears. Miss Jewell put out her hand and dislodged the moonbeam. After a while she began to play with the hair herself.

Alexis stopped playing and kissed Miss Jewell. She relaxed in his arms.

"Mad—we are mad to-night, Dympna," he whispered. "I didn't know there was a fairyland at Pagnell Bois, as well as all their other treasures. I wonder who gave it. Amanda, perhaps. Dear Amanda. But probably she didn't like her Great Personage a bit really. She was only flattered. I expect he was fat and gouty, with a red face. But fairyland all the same. And Lady Athaliah is the witch, up there in her tower. I wonder if she is weaving spells over a cauldron. . . . Mad witch. All mad. Be a little mad too, Dympna darling. Don't hold on to yourself so much."

Miss Jewell's brain kept on asking questions in the middle of her rapture. What were they doing in the drawing-room now? She hoped her absence wasn't spoiling a second bridge-four. What would they say if they knew . . . ?

"Let's go and see whether the witch is looking out

of her tower. We can creep round through the bushes so that she can't see us."

Alexis led her out of the temple, and down a narrow, mossy path towards the pond. Perhaps he was right, thought Miss Jewell. Perhaps she ought to let herself go more. She determined not to think any more about the people in the drawing-room, and ran ahead of him down the path.

They stopped in the shadows that thronged the edge of the thicket, and peered out across the lawn at the tower. There was a light in a low window, but no sign of Lady Athaliah.

They stood for a little, Alexis's arm around Miss Jewell's shoulders, listening to the sounds of the night and the distant thunder, snuffing the creamy syringa and the blown scent from the rose-garden. Alexis plucked some strands of syringa and wove them into a loose, untidy wreath. He set it on Miss Jewell's coppery hair, that gleamed occasionally golden, and the thick, sweet scent of it, doubly strong from the blossoms Alexis had crushed as he wove the garland, rose up into her nostrils, up into her brain.

The thunder was rolling nearer, and now a brilliant flash, sprung from nowhere, lit the house for a blinding moment. The tower stood out black against the sky ; the cedars seemed to shoot up into the air

to immense heights. Then for a moment there was a lull. Miss Jewell heard her heart beating, and Alexis's, too, as she pressed against him.

The thunder crashed. Not so very near after all, thought Miss Jewell, but coming closer.

A figure appeared on the roof of the tower.

Alexis took Miss Jewell's hand and guided her through the undergrowth towards the pond. Tangles of ivy and periwinkle netted their feet, and briars tore at Miss Jewell's thin dress, but she hardly noticed them. Her brain was asleep and her senses all awakened, answering the wild scents and the little noises that ran here and there over the waiting garden.

Down by the pond they were sheltered from the house and the tower. The cedars and the angle of the shrubbery formed a dense, velvety screen. Alexis leant on the stone coping and looked down at the water. Here it was clear and weedless and deep ; farther out grew the lilies, and the water was black and opaque, like onyx ; veined like onyx, too, with moonlit ripples.

A great cloud swept up over the moon, and suddenly everything was dark. There was a flash of lightning behind the cedar ; it did not illumine the corner where Miss Jewell and Alexis were. Then darkness again ; only high above, the glow of the summer sky, thin and blue.

The storm really was close now. The thunder rolled perceptibly sooner after the flash.

Alexis went down the low steps that led to the pond.

"Dympna," he said, "look at the water. It is dark and soft. Feel it. It's warm as blood." He spattered a little over her wrist ; it struck cool and grateful ; "not so warm as my blood," thought Miss Jewell.

Lightning again, behind the wall of the cedars, and swift thunder.

"Dympna," said Alexis, "the water is soft and friendly. We're mad to-night."

His voice thrilled up and down Miss Jewell's spine. She hardly heard what he said. In the darkness, above the perpetual thunder, she heard rustlings and swishings.

She stood quite tense, waiting for the next flash.

It came. Blindingly, dazzlingly, it came. For the space of its bright passing, as the yellow forks parted and tore down the clouded sky, Miss Jewell saw the light shine and glister on the naked body of Alexis, taut and poised at the foot of the steps, as he stretched himself upwards to dive. She just saw the muscles roll and stiffen on his chest and thighs, and the light went.

The thunder crashed straight upon its going. Two more bright flashes succeeded each other

swiftly ; the earth shook, and more than thunder seemed to bellow in Miss Jewell's beautiful ears. They rang with the sound of it when the skies were quiet again. Through the ringing came Alexis's voice from the pond :

“Dympna ! Dympna ! Come into the water ! Come . . .”

Miss Jewell began automatically to reason. It would be cool in the pond. Her mind began to produce excuses of its own volition. One should keep clear of trees during a thunderstorm ; one was safe in water. She began to tear off her clothes. As the storm gave a further pyrotechnical display, and the first great drops of rain fell, she was standing beside Alexis in the pond, on a ledge by the coping. The water was like a cool, satiny mantle that billowed around her ; it kissed her body like a fresh linen sheet when one is feverish.

The rain became a cataract. It sounded like the pattering, the stamping, of thousands of feet in a room above.

Miss Jewell felt Alexis's lips on her hair. Somehow it released her from that lethargic magic. What in the world was she doing here . . . ?

A great, booming voice came to her ears, hurrying footsteps, in no room above, but on the path ; Sir Lothar's voice.

"Come along, princess. Don't be afraid. You won't get anything worse than a wetting. The cedars are all right. I expect that stab of lightning got one of the trees in the park. There was a noise of something crashing. We shouldn't have stayed so long in the rose-garden."

Two figures appeared on the path by the pond, shadows among the shadows. The great bulk of Sir Lothar, dragging along the princess. Alexis and Miss Jewell stood very still.

The first onslaught of rain abated, and now it fell straight and thin, silver spears aimed at the earth, flung by the invisible armies which waged noisy warfare in the skies.

Miss Jewell's mind was working very quickly now. There she was, standing up to her breast in a pond, without anything on but a coronet of syringa, in the company of a young man with nothing on at all, and whom she had only met the day before. It had all happened since noon. Its gigantic absurdity took her breath away. She wanted to laugh, but remembered those on the path. All since noon ; they had all gone mad. She wanted to cry.

With inconsiderate suddenness, the face of the moon shone out peculiarly clear and bright in the night sky.

CHAPTER XIII

Down in the rose-garden, on the seat labelled :

“ Cherchez les effets et les causes,
Nous disent les rêveurs moroses.
Des mots ! Des mots ! Cueillons les roses.”

sat the princess and Sir Lothar. The princess fingered the deep-cut letters.

“ No one reads de Banville now,” she said. “ All the music-makers are forgotten. . . . Oh, what a brilliant flash ! It forked down the sky like a hand with branching fingers. Oh, my poor head, how it hurts ! It is agony.”

She leant forward and rested her forehead on her hands.

“ It’ll be on us soon,” boomed Sir Lothar. By his side a rose shed its petals, as though at the vibration of his voice. “ I’m afraid it’ll break down the flowers rather.”

The princess moaned.

“ We mustn’t get wet,” she wailed. “ Every flash goes through my head like a knife, and every peal of thunder. Oh, oh, oh ! ”

She swayed a little, and leant forward again, so

that her head almost rested upon Sir Lothar's shoulder.

He took no notice of it for a moment, and then, murmuring something consolatory, he put up a tentative hand and stroked her temple. The princess's moans were instantly arrested ; she lay supine against him, while Sir Lothar's big splayed fingers massaged her aching brow. After a little :

"What magnetic fingers you have," she said quietly, as though she feared to break a spell. "So few people can charm away a pain like that. Go on, go on."

Sir Lothar went on. In spite of the steady approach of the storm, a peace, delicate as porcelain, soft as a dove's breast, vibrant as a lute-string, enveloped them. A thousand subtle currents sped from one to another, mingling and interchanging as they crossed the bridge of physical contact. Sir Lothar laid his other hand on the princess's, which were clasped in her lap, and completed the circuit. The currents crackled dizzily and rhythmically around the circle, back and forth ; a magnetic counterpoint.

"It is wonderful," said the princess at last. "You have taken away the pain like smoothing a crease out of a piece of stuff. Thank you ; oh, thank you."

She looked up at him, the whites of her eyes pale as paper beneath the dark orbs.

"You know," she said suddenly, "de Banville was right. Des mots ! Des mots ! All that silly talk we have all the time. And this is the truth. Just to sit among the roses with a friend. Not to reason. Just to be . . ."

Not even Proust could have said she was giving tongue now. Her great bell-like voice was a carillon that chimed in tune with the scents of the roses. Full still and deep, it did not once stray from the key of those perfumes. Herself she was not unconscious of this effect. Who was it—she could not recall ; it was so long ago—who had said, after Gautier, that her voice could be a *symphonie en rose mineur* ?

"It is good to amuse one's self," she said. "So few people know how."

Sir Lothar's hand on hers trembled a little. He ignored her last remark.

"That de Banville quotation is absurd," he said ponderously. "Each seat in the garden should have rather a versicle from the *Litanies de la Rose*. You know, where each phrase ends : 'Fleur hypocrite, fleur du silence.'"

His French was clumsy ; clipped, English French.

A rumble of thunder mingled with the princess's laughter.

"Hypocrite," she said, "that is you, Sir Lothar. They say all the English are hypocrites. Rather I

would say that sincerity is one of their congenital habits, and hypocrisy a national sport."

She spoke at random, for her thoughts were afar, where she was remembering another time when de Gourmont had been whispered to her in a garden. She saw again the parterres about the little villa at Viroflay, and the slim figure in bleu horizon beside her on the white seat ; Viroflay, for the ninety-six hours of his leave ; his shoulder-strap had crushed her cheek. That golden-pale youth had been killed soon after before Verdun, armed with that iron courage which had been eternally embodied in the duc de Rohan's dying : " Ils ne passeront pas." With the lips just withdrawn from hers, he had murmured :

" Que ta bouche soit bénie, car elle est adultère,
Elle a le goût des roses nouvelles, et le goût de la vieille terre."

Then it had seemed a sacrament, because he was going to die (how sure she had been that he was going to die !), and he had asked for her, though she was so much older than he. . . . And now ? She thought for a moment of Valodya. . . .

She could not help contrasting Gervais with Sir Lothar—the supple, strong hands with the big, shapeless ones, the smooth and young with the lax, flaccid lips, the pale, gleaming eyes of Gervais with

the hooded, dim ones of Sir Lothar. Gervais's eyes had been clear and flashing, darting here and there and here again, swift and metallic as a hummingbird. That was what she had called him, oiseau-mouche, kolibri, picaflor ; picking the pockets of all tongues for a word that was instinct with his bright vitality ; finally, huitzitzlin. She thrilled again to the sound of its crisp syllables, and shivered a little. Huitzitzlin . . . le goût des roses nouvelles et le goût de la vieille terre. . . .

Sir Lothar felt the tremors of her emotion. Secure in the obvious interpretation, he bent down and kissed her rather clumsily. For a moment the princess stiffened in his arms. Then she flung back her head, with the gesture which, originating in a desire to distend the loose skin beneath her chin, and show her face becomingly foreshortened, had long since become automatic, and laughed. Now once more there was a note of baying in her laughter.

"And they told me," said she, "that you didn't care for women."

Hard on her words the storm sprang to its climax. The flash, brighter than any previous, shone in her moist eyes ; three consecutive crashes thundered immediately overhead, and seemed to echo deafeningly from the house. In the silence and moonless darkness of their passing, the first heavy drops of

rain fell with a sullen plop. The princess cried out :

“ Oh, Sir Lothar, we shall be soaked. Quick ! This way ! This way is shorter back to the house ! ”

She led him out of the rose-garden, round a narrow path that skirted its ochre-red wall. The rain became a cataract. It sounded like the pattering, the stamping of thousands of feet in a room above. It poured upon them, drenching through their thin clothes, squelched in their shoes. In a moment they were sodden. The princess stumbled, and Sir Lothar took her arm, comforting her. They hurried on, round the edge of the pond.

Sir Lothar's feet were caught and obstructed by something wet and soft. He peered down, trying to penetrate the darkness. Miraculously, there was light again ; weak moonlight through the rain.

“ What the devil . . . ” Sir Lothar's great voice rose in astonishment. “ C l o t h e s . . . ? ”

“ Oh, oh, I nearly fell ! ” cried the princess hysterically, and clutching at Sir Lothar's arm.

With one accord they glanced across the pond. Had some movement out there on the rain-dimpled waters caught their eyes ? Was that a statue, wondered the princess, half-blinded by the rain that fell now in straight, thin lines, like a beaded portière ? She did not remember having seen it before.

“Charlecote!” cried Sir Lothar. “We wondered where you were. And Miss Jewell!”

They paused and surveyed the couple in the pond, who looked now highly ludicrous. Neither the princess nor Sir Lothar ever had any very clear idea of what they exclaimed just then, but their stares of blank astonishment and Sir Lothar’s deep, rumbling giggle galvanised the two to action. Sir Lothar remembered thinking that Charlecote came out of the pond with more dignity than he would have thought possible.

“Mad,” said Mr. Charlecote, “all mad to-night.” He smiled pleasantly at the princess, who said nothing, but just stared, and stopped her hysterical panting. The princess, thought Sir Lothar, did indeed look a little mad, with the blue from her eyelids descending in little rivers down her cheeks, and the black from her brows circling round her eyes.

(“Mine are black by nature,” thought Miss Jewell, in the midst of her embarrassment.)

Sir Lothar, modestly averting his eyes from Miss Jewell, stared still at the princess. And he had kissed her a few minutes ago—that sodden, middle-aged woman. He pulled off his vast, wet coat and wrapped it round Miss Jewell, swathed now like a mummy in her dripping clothes. What a good thing, she thought, that she had put on the old white georgette dress.

Sir Lothar ran off to the house to fetch some dry coverings.

Mr. Charlecote got into his trousers with some pretence of leisure.

The princess was looking at the pond, oblivious of the rain, and thinking aloud.

"I must say I would never have thought it. You Cécile ! . . . Mr. Charlecote, you are a clever man. Really ! . . ."

She laughed aloud.

"I don't quite know what to do," went on the princess, "whether to tell the Jeunes or not. It doesn't seem quite fair to them not to. But I don't want to harm you. I . . . I liked you. Both of you. But I suppose I must tell them. Seduction . . . rape, just under the windows, as it were."

"But nothing has happened, princess," protested Miss Jewell. "Really."

"Oh, nonsense !" said the princess. "I can't believe you were such fools."

"We are, though," said Mr. Charlecote, and laughed. He could not help seeing how terribly funny it all was. "Just a little mad, you know. But quite innocuous."

"Nothing, nothing, nothing has happened," cried Miss Jewell, shaking the rain from her coppery hair.

Sir Lothar returned with a big travelling rug for

Miss Jewell and a vast carriage umbrella, and, venturing away from the comparative shelter of the bushes, they all set out down the path towards the terrace. Sir Lothar's great, booming voice stilled the rustle of the thin, steamy rain.

"Something has happened up at the house," he said. "I didn't stay to ask what. Something rather terrible, I'm afraid."

As they rounded the corner of the cedars they saw people moving about on the terrace, regardless of the rain. Mrs. Dawe, silhouetted against the light from the open door of the drawing-room, was hovering aimlessly. Sir Lothar piloted his party across the lawn to a small side-door. The princess walked on intently, but Miss Jewell looked up over her shoulder at the little knot of people clustered at the base of the tower. Suddenly Mr. Charlecote broke away from them, and ran swiftly across the wet grass and round the tower.

Indoors, Sir Lothar laid a hand on Miss Jewell's shoulder.

"Run up and get into bed at once," he said. "You must be chilled. Leave things to me. And you, princess, you must get some dry things on."

They went off obediently.

"Sir Lothar is a friend," thought Miss Jewell, as she hurried up the wide, marble stairs.

CHAPTER XIV

Lady Damaris listened for a while to Mr. Roxborough, whose conversation meandered gently in the pleasant fields of art. His nimble tongue vaulted with facility from discussion of his own and the *Jeune* pictures to the Velazquez in the Prado, the Soliménas in Count Harrach's collection in Vienna, the mosaics of the tomb of Galla Placidia, and the wondrous statue of Guidarello Guidarelli at Ravenna, the Wiertz museum at Brussels. After Mr. Roxborough had been talking, you came to the conclusion that he had done nothing but recite to you an animated and intricate catalogue of the things he had admired, or felt impelled to admire, but, while his balanced and sonorous periods assailed your ears, it was quite easy to imagine that here was a Petronius come to judgment, even though he wore his tie through a ring.

After a certain time, however, even Mr. Roxborough was bound to sense that Lady Damaris, although she did not interrupt, was not giving him her attention. Her eyes were fixed on the group at the card-table, though from time to time they would

turn slowly to the terrace, as though she were sending her thoughts in pursuit of her vanished guests, and longing to marshal them to some common occupation.

"I am afraid, dear Lady Damaris," said Mr. Roxborough, "that we are all feeling the effects of the sultry atmosphere. But it will be better as soon as the storm has broken. We are all a little nervous. Pray do not let it worry you."

Lady Damaris was a little flushed round the eyes, he noticed.

She sighed, once more the hostess.

"It is very difficult," she said. "Sometimes I think we shall have to give up entertaining. We are getting too old. But Pagnell Bois without guests would be almost a paradox."

Mr. Roxborough made a gesture of protest.

"Too old, Lady Damaris ! Why, of course not. Think of the wonderful memories you have ; think of the first-hand information you can give us about the great men you have known. It would be almost a national disaster if Pagnell Bois were to be closed to visitors. And you have maintained that wonderful tradition of eclectic hospitality, of gathering together here all that is best and most prominent in the nation's intellect and art and politics, of keeping alive the great tradition of the patron. That is the

public plea, Lady Damaris. My personal one is of little account, but, if I may presume on a long acquaintance, where should I have been all these years without my annual visit to Pagnell Bois? My yearly immersion, if I may so put it, in such vital waters. Too old, when all that is newest is known at Pagnell Bois!"

Mr. Roxborough had written the obituary notices of Lady Damaris and her sisters; a delicately etched little character-sketch of each, with a pendant to be published when the last of the Jeunes had been immured for ever in the fantastic, baroque mausoleum at Rakeshame, and entitled: "The Ladies of Pagnell Bois: A Friend sends the following Tribute," which now reposed in the files of *The Times* office, and he could not resist quoting little bits here and there.

Lady Damaris murmured something deprecatory, but appreciative.

"I have tried, of course. And of later years the bulk of the burden has fallen on my shoulders. Bernice really cares for nothing but her Church, and Cleone . . . I am speaking to you as to an old friend, Mr. Roxborough . . . has been a great responsibility for many years. It has been impossible to conceal from our guests that . . . that she has ideas. And, Mr. Roxborough, I am eighty."

"Such an autumn as yours, Lady Damaris, has a completeness no spring can emulate," said Mr. Roxborough. That obituary notice.

"And, of course, Lady Athaliah . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Athaliah has always gone her own way. As soon as our father died (he lived, you know, to be ninety-seven, though, indeed, for the last ten years of his life he was a martyr to almost complete paralysis of the mind) she moved into the tower. She has lived there for close on sixty years. I have never been inside."

Lady Damaris paused, and listened to the rolling thunder. Then, reminiscence in her tones, she went on.

"Even when I was married I was not free. We found that Bernice's health was really unequal to the strain of maintaining Pagnell Bois on its proper footing, and my husband was compelled to abandon his career, after a few years, so that we could live here and look after things ourselves. He never really liked the life. The people who came here were not his people, and I am afraid he was bored. The lack of occupation and congenial society led eventually to sclerosis of the liver. . . . I have sacrificed much to Pagnell Bois, Mr. Roxborough, and now I feel that I am losing grip."

Lady Damaris stopped short as a vivid flash of lightning cut across her words.

"I am sorry," she said. "I should not force these regrets and complaints on you. Forgive me."

Mr. Roxborough executed a complicated manual gesture, under cover of which he was composing a sentence which would convey at once his entire sympathy and his sense of compliment at being taken into Lady Damaris's confidence, when the storm rose to a sudden climax. Three swift crashes succeeded each other, culminating in a great roar of thunder that shook the house. The bridge-players paused, and glanced out of the window as the first great drops of rain fell.

"Oh, dear," cried Lady Damaris, "and all those people in the garden. Poor Athénée will get wet."

There was a hurry of steps on the terrace, and Miss Vulliamy rushed into the room. She was paper-white, and her hair was plastered on her forehead with rain. She stammered hurriedly.

"Quick . . . something has happened. . . . Lady Athaliah . . . the lightning . . . it struck the tower . . . it was terrible."

She swayed a little as she spoke. Mr. Roxborough hastened to her support.

The bridge-players dropped their cards. Mrs.

Dawe gaped at Miss Vulliamy. Mrs. Murat-Blood sprang to her feet.

"We must go and see," she said. "General, we must go and see."

Her tones were pregnant with the ardour of all martial women, from Black Agnes of Dunbar to Mrs. Pankhurst. The general followed her to the door.

"May have set the tower on fire," he muttered.

"Oh, oh!" cried Mrs. Dawe. "I remember a villa we had at Ischl caught fire when it was struck in a thunderstorm. Mostly wood-built, you know...."

No one took any notice of her, and she hovered in the general's wake. Lady Bernice crossed herself, and whispered with rapid lips. Lady Damaris, with a slow dignity, swept ahead of Mrs. Murat-Blood on to the terrace. She walked upright, disregarding the rain, which somehow did not seem to wet her. She stopped at the door of the tower.

"We have no key," she said. "We must break the door. Mr. Roxborough, will you ring for Jerrold?"

Then she turned to Miss Vulliamy, and asked:

"Can you tell us exactly what happened?"

But Miss Vulliamy could only stutter incomprehensible syllables, with her wide eyes fixed on the dim heights of the tower.

They waited, sheltered a little from the down-pour by a jutting cornice, while Mr. Roxborough hurried to find Jerrold and two sleepy footmen. No one said anything, but all stared up at the dark crest of the tower. The questions in their minds filled the air with a vast suspense.

Mr. Roxborough and the footmen returned. They beat and hammered at the door, which did not give way. It was a stout door, metal-bound.

Lady Bernice was weeping.

"Oh," she sobbed, "I knew no good would come of it. Athaliah alone in that great tower. She has some dreadful secret. I have always known it. This is a judgment."

Mr. Roxborough tried to soothe her.

"Quick, quick," urged Miss Vulliamy.

"This is t e r r i b l e," cried Mrs. Dawe.

"Want a ram," said the general. The rain was dripping from his moustaches.

Suddenly the door opened from within. Mr. Charlecote stood on the threshold. Mrs. Dawe gave a little scream.

Mr. Charlecote held up his hand.

"Lady Athaliah is dead," he said.

Nobody moved.

CHAPTER XV

Mr. Charlecote sped lightfoot across the lawn, away from Sir Lothar and the princess and Miss Jewell. The witch, he felt in his romantic heart, something has happened to the witch.

He heard Lady Damaris's voice : " We have no key," and checked his steps. The rustle of the falling rain seemed to call to him to hurry. To hurry, but why? When he had watched from the shadow-thronged thicket with Dympna he had seen an open window, a lighted window, low on to the ground. He ran round the tower, and found the window on its farther side. The knotted ivy seemed to offer itself to his searching feet as he scrambled up to the ledge. His swinging leg overturned the lamp as he landed in the room. For a moment all was darkness, and he listened to the blare of the loud-speaker, blatant and inept, emphasising only the surrounding stillness. His eyes grew accustomed to the pale, dank light that pried into the room through the windows, and he moved across to find the switch. The sofa where he had sat that afternoon tripped him. Only that afternoon; it was so distant now. His fingers

crept up the farther wall, and bright light flooded the small, suburban-looking room, with its gramophone and water-colours and paper flowers.

A voice, unmistakably French, sang in mock-American :

“Nothing but blue skies from now on . . .”

Mr. Charlecote turned off the wireless. Should he open the door on to the terrace and let in Lady Damaris and the others ? Already he was half-way across to the door, but something urged him, with a force too great indeed to be mere curiosity, up those mysterious stairs, to find the witch. He ran back, and up the dim flight, past the upper room, where lights burned, up again and on, to the roof.

The rain-shattered moonlight poured a pallid glimmer over it. There were dark shadows on the uneven leads. Mr. Charlecote stood still and looked slowly round, sorting the shadows. On one side the wooden parapet was riven, and by the rift lay the witch.

Mr. Charlecote tiptoed across to her (why tiptoe, he wondered ?) and looked down at her. Her splendid purple satin was soaked and dark, her face blackened and distorted ; her charred wig had slipped awry. “Poor witch,” he thought, “your storm has killed you.” On her bared shoulder, where the dress

was ripped and burned, was stamped an image of the great cedar.

Mr. Charlecote didn't look any more. He left the witch lying in the rain, and went down to the room on the first floor. He could not help smiling as he glanced around ; this, then, was the poor witch's poor secret.

"Athaliah, daughter of Jezebel," he said aloud, inconsequently, and laughed. Thinking retrospectively, he knew that it was what he had expected.

There were about the room, he noticed, all the time-worn pornographs ; the walls were frescoed with pale, obscene figures. Where had he seen just that style before, just that treatment of the whites ? Of course, in the picture by Lady Athaliah that Lady Damaris had shown him. So the old witch had painted these fatuous, aphrodisiac emblems on her walls ; nothing original, he thought—all the old classical inversions and perversions. There, too, were the expected Pompeian statuettes ; the photographs that you could get in any dockside street from Hamburg to Bahia ; the illustrations, cut from badly printed periodicals, that were kept underneath the counter, or beneath a heap of local views ; the art-studies of the nude, taken by Germanic barons domiciled in Sicily ; more photographs, from that museum of erotic abnormalities

collected by the Herr Doktor in Berlin ; there the obvious literature, from Ovid (a French translation) to the Decameron, from the Count of Champagne to James Joyce.

Mr. Charlecote thought of that Roumanian friend who had sung to him so sweetly on the island of Lacroma ; thought of the rooms in that friend's villa at Sinaia, above the swift Prahova. It was strange that Pagnell Bois should hold their fellow. His mind flew, too, to an abbey in Sicily, a cheerful, whitewashed building among pleasant trees. " ' Do what thou wilt ' shall be the whole of the law," he remembered. That had not been Lady Athaliah's motto. Stupid Lady Athaliah, she seemed now so pathetic and foolish. Poor, frustrated, broken witch.

There came a hammering at the door below.

Mr. Charlecote's eye fell on *Pelican Chain*, which reposed on a low table. He laughed. Beside it lay copies of *Freundschaft* and *Die Ehe*, and Coleman's *Rodia*d. Lady Athaliah had been a futile witch.

The banging at the door below loudened and continued. Mr. Charlecote wondered what he should do. If only the tower had caught fire, that it might burn to the ground, and with it the witch's secret, her poor little grubby secret. He toyed

with the idea of setting it alight himself. It would not be easy. There was nothing inflammable—no oil. And now they would all swarm in, and register their various horrors, heart-felt or hypocritical, and Lady Athaliah's credit would be smirched and muddied. The tale would go abroad, and the Jeunes would have a new notoriety. He imagined the Sunday papers. What, after all, did it matter? They were just a pack of silly old women, living on the outworn reputations of people who had used their bed-linen and eaten their food. He didn't feel any pity for the Jeunes who were left; quite possibly their dignity would weather the storm. But somehow he was sorry for Lady Athaliah, the poor, blackened witch, up on the roof in the rain.

He shrugged his shoulders and went down the stairs. He drew the great, rusty bolts, turned the key, and opened the door. They were all clustered about the steps, pale faces in the shadow.

"Lady Athaliah is dead," he said.

For a long moment nobody moved.

Then Lady Bernice cried out:

"Athaliah! I knew it would come. Oh, Lord, have mercy!"

She crossed herself again in anguish, and pushed forward to the door.

In the background, Lady Cleone repeated:

"Dead. Athaliah dead. She always said she would live to ninety."

"She should have died hereafter," said Mr. Charlecote idiotically. The sound of his own voice steadied his nerves a little.

Mr. Roxborough hovered about the outskirts of the little crowd, making apologetic noises and waving his hands. Mrs. Dawe's open mouth was a great, round shadow in her white face.

Lady Damaris, daughter of a proud, brave race, took the blow unflinching. She moved forward with set lips up the steps, and confronted Mr. Charlecote.

"I must go up," she said. "Please let me pass."

Mr. Charlecote barred the doorway with his arms. His voice became very low and earnest. Poor witch !

"Please, please, don't go up, Lady Damaris. Believe me, there is nothing you can do. Please don't go "

To Miss Vulliamy, shivering with cold and a strange, nervous fatigue, he looked very young suddenly, and adorable. She wanted to smooth the wrinkles out of his forehead, and put his wet, untidy hair straight.

"I must go," said Lady Damaris. "I have a right."

Mr. Charlecote fell back. It was no good trying to save the witch.

"Jerrold, telephone at once for Dr. Starke," said Lady Damaris. She beckoned to the footmen. "Lady Athaliah must be moved," she said, and swept into the tower.

The others, after a slight hesitation, followed after; curious, trying to look condoling. They glanced swiftly round the room as they entered. Mr. Charlecote could see their disappointment at its commonplace furnishings, its complacent ordinariness.

"Upstairs, Mrs. Murat-Blood. You'll find it upstairs," he said savagely.

Mrs. Murat-Blood did not answer, but, after a cursory glance about her, moved to the staircase. The others sidled after her, Lady Bernice and Lady Cleone at their head. Miss Vulliamy remained.

"Tell me," she said, "what is upstairs?"

"Can't you guess?" asked Mr. Charlecote. He sat down on the sofa and watched the water drip from his clothes to the floor. He picked up the big, silver box of cigarettes and took a gasper. "Turk or virgin, which you like," echoed in his ears a harsh, remembered voice.

Miss Vulliamy sat down opposite him; where the witch had sat that afternoon.

"Yes," she said, "I guessed ages ago. It makes me . . . I don't know. I don't think I'll go up."

Mr. Charlecote looked at her sidelong as she got up again and crossed the room to the gramophone. She looked at the record, her back to him, recapturing her self-control.

"One had almost expected the Venusberg music," she said, with a forced, grating laugh.

"How wet you are," she said, looking at him again. "I had no idea it had been raining as hard as that."

From the room above there came a cry—the voice of Lady Bernice. She came down the stairs, supported by Mr. Roxborough. On his face was an expression of immense experience.

"Athaliah ! Athaliah !" cried Lady Bernice. "My sister ! I can't bear it ! God have mercy on her ! I can't bear it. . . ." Her wailing died away in hysterical sobs.

"Ssssh . . . cclk !" crowed Mr. Roxborough comfortingly. "Let me take you to your room, Lady Bernice."

"No, no, I can't bear to be alone. I have to stay. . . Oh, I can't bear it !"

Miss Vulliamy turned to Mr. Charlecote.

"No, of course, we mustn't any of us miss anything," she said, in a low, bitter voice.

The others came trooping downstairs. Lady Damaris's voice sounded from the room above, hard and clear.

"Please go back to the drawing-room. There is nothing to be done here," she said.

"She's putting up a good show," thought Mr. Charlecote.

Mrs. Dawe came down, staring straight before her, as though she were walking in her sleep ; Mrs. Murat-Blood frowned resolutely, a modern woman ; the general, his face a deep, heavy purple, scrutinised the carpet and breathed noisily ; Lady Cleone's empty face was for once half-tenanted—by a sneer ; Miss Vulliamy joined the little procession that filed out on to the terrace, looking back at Mr. Charlecote as she reached the door. He ignored the lift of her eyebrow.

After a little Lady Damaris came down, followed by the servants, who looked preternaturally solemn : the face of one was a bright, fiery red.

"Send the doctor straight here when he comes," commanded Lady Damaris, and dismissed them.

"I apologise, Mr. Charlecote," she said. "You were quite right. We should not have gone up."

"I'm dreadfully sorry, Lady Damaris. I tried . . ." began Mr. Charlecote.

Lady Damaris checked him. Her face was calm, impassive.

"We have a lot of explanations to hear, Mr. Charlecote. Will you come back to the drawing-room?"

Mr. Charlecote followed her out on to the terrace. She was doing this well, he thought, damned well! He would never have thought it of her. Respect was a fairly new sensation to Mr. Charlecote.

They found the party standing about the room vaguely, uncertain what to do. Sir Lothar was there, and the princess too, in another dress, of black georgette, her face and lips pale and rather impressive. The moment Mr. Charlecote and Lady Damaris came in, Mrs. Murat-Blood and Miss Vulliamy began to speak at once.

"I should like to say," said Mrs. Murat-Blood, "that of course we all . . ."

"Perhaps we had all better go to bed," said Miss Vulliamy.

Lady Damaris raised her hand. She looked younger and more alive than ever before. Miss Vulliamy suddenly felt that she realised the underlying strength of the Jeunes.

"No. Please, don't go. There are some things that must be said."

The group wavered, became stabilised again. Lady Cleone sat down.

"Oh, la, la!" she said.

"Sit down, everyone, please," requested Lady Damaris. Herself, she took a straight, tall chair by the fireplace.

For a few minutes silence lay over them, like a sheltering mantle that at any moment some one of them might lift, letting in the cold. Mrs. Dawe's weak eyes fluttered here and there, as though she were seeking an avenue of escape ; finally, they rested on the empty grate, and she sat very still, hugging the cloak of silence. Mrs. Murat-Blood held herself very straight and taut in her big, upholstered chair ; in her mind she was tabulating the agenda. Sir Lothar was gazing at the moulded ceiling, his hands raised, finger-tips pressed judicially together ; he was trying to imagine the frescoes Mrs. Murat-Blood had told him about. Mr. Roxborough allowed his glance to travel slowly from one member of the party to another ; when he had completed this ocular excursion, he embarked on it afresh. Lady Cleone plucked nervously at her dress, glancing from time to time at Lady Damaris, as though she knew the expression of quiet authority reflected there. Lady Bernice clutched a golden crucifix, which she had produced from some cache beneath her bodice ; its chain had caught in her pearls, noticed Miss Vulliamy, who was thinking of nothing in particular, but just waiting. The princess alone remained

standing, one elbow laid on the marble chimney-piece, her eyes, focused wide apart, looking down the room and out into the garden.

At length Lady Damaris lifted a corner of that soft, quiet mantle.

"My sister Athaliah is dead," she said. "You have seen her room. You, Sir Lothar, and you, Athénée, have, I presume, been told of it."

Her voice betrayed no sign of conscious control. Sir Lothar bowed in acquiescence, and the princess shook her head at Lady Damaris with incalculable sympathy.

"I shall, of course, ask you not to spread abroad what you have seen. You are my guests. I am at your mercy."

Everyone signified silent acceptance of this request. There was an uncomfortable pause. Then the princess flung a pebble into the pond of embarrassment.

"After all," she said, with a little shrug, "it is not so very unusual. You should see my brother-in-law's study in his château in Auvergne. . . ."

Stammering with relief, Mrs. Dawe burst in :

"Yes, and the House of the Faun . . ."

A chatter of reminiscence arose, as everyone tried to prove to everyone else that what they had seen was altogether commonplace. The ripples on the

pond widened, and spread to its edge, and were no more. Mrs. Dawe coughed anxiously.

"The servants," moaned Lady Bernice, "the servants."

"Can they be silenced, Lady Damaris?" asked Roxborough, extending towards her a gallant and protective hand. "I am sure that I speak for all of us when I say that you may trust us."

"I have dealt with the footmen," said Lady Damaris. "I have made it abundantly plain to them that I can make things very unpleasant for them if they talk. And Jerrold will see to that. He is to be trusted. But there is something else we must know. No, don't move, please, Mrs. Murat-Blood. Mr. Charlecote!"

Mr. Charlecote rose and bowed, feeling conspicuously formal. This had ceased to be life and had become drama. It concerned him that the witch's death, which had seemed so like an epilogue, had somehow become a prologue.

"You were in the tower, Mr. Charlecote. Why?"

Everyone turned and looked at Mr. Charlecote, as though this were quite a new aspect of the case.

"Oh, Damaris, how can you?" asked Lady Bernice.

"If this is painful to you, perhaps I . . ." began Mr. Roxborough.

"Please," said Lady Damaris. "Why should we pretend? My sister Athaliah meant nothing to me. For years she has lived her own life. We have been strangers. I shall, of course, in due time simulate grief. This is neither the time nor the place for it. For the moment, I wish only to avert scandal."

"Our own sister, Damaris," said Lady Bernice. "Our elder sister."

"You are being sentimental, Bernice. Well, Mr. Charlecote?"

Lady Damaris looked him in the eyes with a cold stare.

"I climbed into the tower a few minutes before I opened the door and let you in, Lady Damaris. I had been in the garden, and heard you say you had no key. I remembered an open window I had seen earlier in the evening. Sir Lothar told me something had happened."

"Athaliah and him. Alone in the tower. Oh, I think that's very funny," piped Lady Cleone. "I always knew about Athaliah, you know. Oh, yes. She took me into the tower. Years ago. You know when. It was very funny, alone in the tower with Athaliah. Just like him. Very funny."

She let out a little, high laugh, all on one note, that shivered like quicksilver down Miss Vulliamy's spine.

"Why didn't you let us in at once, Mr. Charlecote?" asked Lady Damaris.

"No, no, Cleone," said the princess, "he had only just gone in, only just left us. We were taking little Miss Jewell back to the house."

"Miss Jewell?" Half a dozen voices caught up the name and repeated it incredulously. The princess glanced at Sir Lothar, who was frowning like Jove.

"You said Miss Jewell, Athénée," said Lady Damaris, "but she was in her room resting. What has she to do with it?"

The princess considered for a moment.

"We want the truth, Athénée."

The princess thought that she had never really seen Damaris before, never suspected this quiet authority. She was really rather splendid. Although it seemed rather unnecessary to make so much fuss. Probably no one would have thought about Mr. Charlecote being with Athalie.

"You shall have the truth," she said. She had her head thrown back becomingly. "No, Sir Lothar, we can't spare them. We found Mr. Charlecote and Cécile in the garden, in the pond. . . ."

"I believe you're shielding him, princess. . . ."

"Shielding him," murmured Mr. Charlecote, to himself. Where was the ecstatic Arcady now? Gone ;

and yet the more real for the unreality of this scene in the long drawing-room.

" . . . I believe he was in the tower with the old lady among all those scabrous things," cried Miss Vulliamy.

" I say," said the general, " hold hard ! "

" But you didn't even go upstairs," said Mrs. Dawe, gazing wide-eyed at Miss Vulliamy. " How can you know ? "

" The pond ? " questioned Mrs. Murat-Blood, her brows still furrowed with the endeavour of sorting the evidence tendered to this informal committee. " Had they fallen in, or what ? "

Mrs. Dawe had the most vivid memories of falling into the Bosphorus out of a small and capricious skiff, but realised just in time that her reminiscence would be out of place. Sir Lothar shrugged his elephantine shoulders and looked at Mrs. Murat-Blood.

" They were—well, I suppose you would call it bathing," he boomed. " The princess and I were hurrying back from the rose-garden by the short cut. We had been caught by the rain. We . . . er . . . stumbled over the clothes on the path, and so were made aware of their presence."

" Their clothes ? Do you mean to say they were naked ? " Lady Bernice's voice thrilled with a

magnificent Schadenfreude. Neither Mrs. Murat-Blood nor the general could help smiling and raising their eyebrows in polite and tolerant surprise. Mr. Roxborough waved a hand in the air, and Mrs. Dawe blushed and bridled. Miss Vulliamy and Lady Damaris turned upon Mr. Charlecote glances respectively of fierce and of cold enquiry, while he smiled rather brazenly at the company. The princess, her head flung back and her lips parted in a smile of serene triumph, was still gazing into space. She was thinking of that unposted letter to Valodya ; here were all the puppets, jerked about on God knew what strings. . . .

“ Yes,” she said, in her wonderful, great voice, that one expected would set the strings of the pianoforte a-thrumming (ah, Proust, how aptly indeed you named those bell-like notes !). “ Yes, they were naked. Bathing under the moon. Two beautiful creatures who had forgotten that this is the twentieth century, that this is Pagnell Bois, that there would be a to-morrow. Who knew only that there was a moon and a storm and great currents and voices in the air. Can’t you feel it as they did ? Can’t you remember that moonlight, when one is alone, is the loneliest thing in the world ? Just as electricity is the most crowded. No one could take off his clothes and jump into a lake

under an arc-lamp. Don't you know that the moon is the governess of tides? That the currents of the storm send sparks leaping to the currents in our bodies? What else they did . . . *mon Dieu*, what does it matter? They say they didn't. I don't believe them. You don't need sheets to make a bed. *Pour ma part, je les félicite*. Here are we, all of us dead, dead, and they two alive. . . ."

She broke off, and laughed, not foolishly, but with a gentle condescension, as of a goddess returning to the plane of men, who have for a while observed her in her transcendental home.

("Miss Jewell!" thought Miss Vulliamy. "And I helped her to this. With my rouge on her cheeks!")

"*Athénée!*" said Lady Bernice, emphatically.

Just like Miranda and the mushrooms, influenced by the moon; the idea slipped into Mrs. Murat-Blood's head. She thrust it away.

Mr. Charlecote made a movement towards the princess.

"You knew, you knew," he said. "You weren't dead then. You understood. Mad, all mad," he ended happily.

"Leave me alone, *Bérénice*," the princess went on. She stood very straight and still. She was no longer that thing of shining black, Mr. Charlecote thought; and there was no paint on her face, pale

under her fine-plucked eyebrows. "Leave me alone. Weren't they right? Can't you feel their glorious madness? Est-ce que ça ne vous chante pas? Don't you see that if Athalie had done that years ago that room in the tower would never have existed? Poor Athalie. I guessed it, long ago. It's the same with my brother-in-law. He has never slept with anyone in his life. He had an appalling squint and rheumatoid arthritis, poor man. No, don't try to stop me. Let's speak the truth, shall we? Just for once in our lives. I'd have done it if I'd been in their position. Don't you know that old madness that overtook them, the madness that has made the world? The thunder and lightning and moon and young summer. And those two alone in the gardens, in the world. Oh, what a superb *décor* for their mumming. . . ."

Mrs. Dawe's control broke.

"Standing up to their necks in the pond, in the rain," she chattered, and burst into shrill laughter.

Lady Damaris rapped sharply on the Empress Josephine's table. What had it not seen at Fontainebleau, at Malmaison?

"This rhapsody is very charming, Athénée," she said, "but rather surprising. Mrs. Murat-Blood, I wonder if you will be good enough to go and fetch Miss Jewell down? I don't want to give the servants

FROLIC WIND

any more . . . food for thought than they already have."

Mrs. Murat-Blood, ordered about for once in her life, left the room without question.

Mrs. Dawe continued to laugh.

CHAPTER XVI

Miss Jewell lay in her big, canopied bed, not at all at ease, but in a strained attitude, clutching a hot-water bottle. She was excessively warm, but far too busy setting her mind in order to observe her physical discomfort.

She felt she had got a great deal to consider. She must determine her exact relations with Alexis. One's relations with people were always very difficult. You would fly into their cages, meaning to stay just for a little, and there you would be, shut up for ever behind the bars of their valuation of you, or, rather, of the valuation you had deliberately put upon yourself in order to make them accessible to you. And so they went on seeing you in a dark mirror. Miss Jewell was not at all sure in what mirror Alexis saw her. Mostly he seemed to see people in the same mirror, clear and bright. But true? Miss Jewell shivered.

And what precisely did she and Alexis mean to each other? Every time she was really swinging along the road to some definite conclusion, the shadow of Sir Lothar popped, as it were, out of the

hedge, and said : " Something has happened up at the house. Something rather terrible, I'm afraid." Her mind would boil and seethe with everything at once, decline to consider any one aspect. What had Sir Lothar meant ? There had been that terrible crash of thunder ; perhaps it had done some damage. . . .

She saw how terribly funny she and Alexis must have looked, standing about for no very apparent reason in not very clean water. It had been right at the time. The glass of retrospect was a distorting one.

In her that day so many emotions had budded and blossomed, fickle as ribands on the wind, bright as limbs of fire, dark and clinging as ivy, yet simple and inevitable as the flight of arrows, there seemed no strength in her mind or her body for further feeling. She was tired with a great exaltation, and exalted with a great weariness. She was afraid, and yet desirous of pressing on. There was a sensual flower for her yet to pluck, though she was full of a premonition of imminent climax, yet wanting only rest, but reaching out to to-morrow, as if it were a gift.

And now a recapture of the madness that had sent them careering about the garden, tripping in tangles of periwinkle, their garments clutched by

fingers of briar, their minds bemused by the perfume of the syringa, once more assailed her heart-strings ; and they echoed again to the sound of that fluting and to the saccharine lilt of the Chocolate Soldier, and she clasped in her hot hands the bruised flowers of her garland, that now lay, shedding its battered petals, on her blue silk eiderdown. And the silk that flowed down her limbs was cool as the water, and, all over her body, every scratch of briar and bruise of Alexis's strong hands throbbed again and was renewed. And she knew now that, though the magical dream of the evening would in the morning be an indiscreet, sordid nightmare, one day she would turn back to it as to a fantastic illustration (Dulac, Alexis had said in the garden) in a book that was writ in a language she could not understand, and wonder that such a thing had ever happened to her, to Cecilia Jewell—a cousin, you know, of the Jeunes of Pagnell Bois.

But to-morrow would edit its own version of to-day's adventure.

With a long, deep sigh, that drained her body swiftly of rapture, she focused her thoughts anew. There was something important she must consider. The princess. The princess thought that she and Alexis had . . . And surely it was right that spiritual intimacy should be fulfilled by physical intimacy ;

surely . . . But, nevertheless, Miss Jewell could not help wishing that the princess did not think that of them. Not that the princess seemed to mind ; she wondered only whether she ought to tell the Jeunes. And Sir Lothar ? What he thought Miss Jewell could not determine. But he seemed to be ready to stand by them. She thought probably that in the end he would agree with everyone, hoping that thus the affair would die from lack of discord. That was Sir Lothar's way. The princess would want to have it out ; she liked things to be set in black and white and neatly blotted and put away. She treated life as though it were one of those miraculous embroideries which are as perfect on the reverse as on the right side. She made her mind a piece of orderly needlework, cutting off sharply the advancing and retreating thread-ends of hope and regret.

Miss Jewell herself felt that she was ready to hurl defiance at them all, and run away . . . no, not run ; march away proudly . . . with Alexis. If she felt really sure of him. If only her heart were less sure and her reason more. How could you ever feel really sure of anyone like that ? Even if you had known him a hundred years. But a voice that was neither her heart nor her reason, but some ancient wisdom given tongue, seemed to call to Miss Jewell and tell

her, if she felt steadfastly, justifiably sure of him, how dull, how devastatingly dull it would be.

Miss Jewell abandoned the analysis of her own feelings, and tried to evoke the reactions of the Jeunes, provided that the princess had told them. Lady Bernice would weep and invoke her god, who was especially interested in domestic dissension ; she would compare her to erring housemaids, toward whom her god was wont to turn a face of grim, relentless generosity. Lady Cleone . . . well, Lady Cleone would look blank, and say nothing. Days afterwards she would make a remark of astounding pertinence. Lady Athaliah ? Miss Jewell could not be sure. Lady Athaliah had always been roughly kind. In her mind, she seemed to hear Lady Athaliah make some trenchant comment in her harsh, peacock-like voice, but the words she could not guess. Lady Damaris—there was the rub. Often Miss Jewell had wondered whether Lady Damaris had any opinions. She seemed to be so faultless a mirror of tolerance and good-breeding and other people's ideas that one doubted whether there could possibly be some shrouded surface that reflected her own convictions. Yet on occasion she could display a dark, calm, unanswerable authority.

There came a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Miss Jewell.

"Alexis," said her heart.

"Of course not," countered her brain sternly.

Mrs. Murat-Blood came into the room and released a flood of light.

"I wonder, Miss Jewell," she said, in her committee manner, "whether you feel up to putting on your things and coming downstairs for a little? Lady Damaris wants to speak to you."

So the princess had told, thought Miss Jewell. She looked at Mrs. Murat-Blood with wide eyes. She had not really expected that.

Mrs. Murat-Blood felt herself succumb to sentiment. Miss Jewell, in her thin nightdress and with her hair all disordered, looked so very young, and . . . what was the word? . . . so virginal.

"Of course, it was very naughty of you, dear, but you needn't be frightened. Naturally, we don't believe all the princess tells us. And, after all, everyone is free."

That wasn't the real Mrs. Murat-Blood—not the end of the sentence, thought Miss Jewell; that was the public Mrs. Murat-Blood, ridden by her Old Man of ideals.

"We must have looked so absolutely ridiculous," she said, rather shakily, as she jumped out of bed. "So terribly funny."

She had not really meant to say that. It had just

slipped out. Mrs. Murat-Blood wouldn't think it was funny.

Mrs. Murat-Blood wanted to laugh at it. But the dark consciousness that always watched her would not let her. Instead, she wrinkled her brows a little.

"Oh, but, dear Miss Jewell, surely it was hardly funny? Of course, I can quite understand that you were over-excited. . . . Naturally, we have all felt it."

"Hard to believe, hard to believe," sang Miss Jewell's eyes, youthfully, egotistically, to the mirror, as she combed her thick, coppery hair. Now that the murder was out, she felt better.

"I quite see how you have been hemmed in," went on Mrs. Murat-Blood. "Of course, the Jeunes are wonderful people. In many ways I admire them tremendously. But hardly the people to bring up a girl. I expect they tyrannised rather, didn't they?"

She looked at Miss Jewell with a puzzled expression in her dark, clear eyes. Miss Jewell thought her eyes had the look of a huntress, and then again of a rabbit, frightened. Silly Mrs. Murat-Blood, she thought; but she was trying to be kind.

"We quiet ones," said Miss Jewell suddenly, "always break out the wildest."

There was an impish gleam in her eyes. All this

fuss because she and Alexis had had a bathe. Of course, they had omitted to put on bathing-dresses. Alexis had looked rather nice, just in that moment when the lightning flashed. His body was white and firm, solid, yet not ungraceful. But Lady Damaris had taken her to the Lido the year before. It was true Lady Damaris had repeatedly changed her position on the sands whenever a beautifully tanned young Argentinian, in practically no lime-green bathing-garment, had approached. Miss Jewell had stared at him, because he was peculiarly well built. But she had longed to tell Lady Damaris not to be alarmed, because, like most Argentinians, he had a hairy chest, which she could not abide. There was something so aggressively masculine about it, so opposite, so hostile. Miss Jewell preferred a being more epicene.

It was rather mean to tease Mrs. Murat-Blood like that. Even if she did really and truly believe what the princess said. Miss Jewell felt, in a way, that she did. And she and Alexis had had nothing for it. Almost she wished that they had.

"... expect everyone to see it as a mere adventure," Mrs. Murat-Blood was saying. "I understand. And Lady Damaris is very broadminded, when you consider her age and the traditions she has lived among. One wants to be fair all round.

Naturally, you and Mr. Charlecote didn't think of that."

It annoyed Miss Jewell that Mrs. Murat-Blood, so far from nature, so unwilling to approach it, should so repeatedly say "Naturally . . ." It did not seem to be of any use for either her or Alexis to deny the charge. No one would believe either of them. "Couldn't believe you were such fools," the princess had said. Miss Jewell had a feeling of freedom. Perhaps it was all for the best. Perhaps now they would let her and Alexis get married, or make them get married, and they could go off together then, and really start just as nicely as other people. Miss Jewell still had a longing to be nice.

She pulled on a frock—any old frock.

"Ready," she said. "Now for it" ; and turned to Mrs. Murat-Blood with a swift, upward smile.

Mrs. Murat-Blood led the way downstairs. It was queer, she thought, the way Miss Jewell was taking it. She had always seemed so negative and tractable, so timid. Mrs. Murat-Blood felt that she was going down the wide, cold, marble stairs beside a young spark that might burst into a fire too brilliant, a scorching flame ; as though they had called forth a primitive emotion that might engulf them, had sown the dragon's tooth. This was something she was remote from, with which she could not cope. She

shivered a little, and crisped her fingers, with the gesture of one who has touched a smirching substance. She looked at Miss Jewell sidelong under the searching lights of the hall. Miss Jewell walked with her head thrown back, young and uncertain and fervent as a flame.

CHAPTER XVII

Mrs. Dawe's laughter died away in a strangled gasp, and Mr. Roxborough brought her a glass of brandy, discreetly sodaed, from the big ormolu table. The fizz of the syphon woke Lady Bernice from her mournful reverie. Miss Vulliamy sat quite still, hating the others. She was full of a dark presence of jealousy, of futility. They reeked always in her, these two dark pillars of smoke, shutting off from her the sun of life. She was wrapped thickly in them, feeling nothing but this heavy, jealous, futile ache that was almost unbearable.

"Oh," said Lady Bernice, "my dress is quite wet. And so is yours, Damaris. I hope we shan't catch cold. I really hardly noticed it out on the terrace. And you, Sir Lothar, you are soaking."

"I shall be all right, Lady Bernice," boomed Sir Lothar. "I'm used to it. I don't think you'll hurt, either, any of you. It's only surface damp."

They were joined by Mrs. Dawe, now sufficiently recovered to be geographically reminiscent of exposure to rain, and Mr. Roxborough, in a discussion about catching cold. It was a relief to them all to

find an impersonal subject of conversation, and they seized the straws of talk and brandished them cheerfully and defiantly at each other.

Jerrold came in and told Lady Damaris that Dr. Starke was out, but would come up to the house as soon as he could.

"Very good," she said, "but I am afraid you must stay up until he comes. I hope he won't be very long."

Jerrold withdrew.

"Not," murmured Lady Damaris to herself, "that there is anything he can do."

She felt tired, but forced to an effort. There was so much to straighten out before she could rest. She felt her control, her mind, the greatest force in her stretched and bent almost beyond bearing. Was this age, she wondered, when shock was a cumulative force, when you felt that the bow of your consciousness could not be further curved? Unlucky steel, that could not break, but must bend and bend, beyond endurance, but stand the strain; when it longed to snap.

Under the cover of the chatter about Lady Bernice, Miss Vulliamy crossed to Mr. Charlecote.

"Je dois vous dire," she said, clothing her commonplace in French, as usual when she wished to be impressive, or to say things in English beyond her

daring, "que je suis dégoûtée. J'ai bien remarqué que vous vous étiez amouraché de la fillette, sotté qu'elle soit. Et alors il vous faut aller jouer Don Juan dans le jardin. Vraiment, je ne l'aurais pas cru de la petite. Si l'on m'avait proposé une excursion de la sorte . . . Pfui Teufel ! C'est ignoble . . . Et enfin, avec cette putain . . ."

Her thick lips sneered rather inelegantly. Mr. Charlecote, who was suddenly overwhelmed with a violence of dislike of Miss Vulliamy, and resented hearing her call Dympna a little whore, smiled at her treacherously.

"Oho," said he, "but no one did propose it to you, dear Miss Vulliamy. And I am compelled, by the violence of your opinions, to conclude that you are jealous . . . jalouse . . . eifersüchtig . . . gelosa . . . envidiosa. In which language is it most intelligible to you ? "

Miss Vulliamy found herself unable to speak from sheer rage. But she felt better, all the same. The crossing of swords had relieved a little the intolerable burden of necessity of strife that was in her.

"Ah," cried Lady Cleone to the room at large, "we can't be so wet as the people in the pond."

All eyes were diverted to Mr. Charlecote, and Miss Vulliamy moved away from him and sat down

beside Sir Lothar. She had never imagined that Mr. Charlecote could be so ill-bred. Mr. Charlecote, who could not restrain entirely an expression of triumphant superiority, reflected upon the strange phenomenon that people who are rude are always intensely astonished and genuinely pained at getting as good as they give. His eyes were on the door. Dympna, Dympna, he wanted her back there, close to him, to know again the subtle scent of her and the fine radiance of her skin. They were going to be attacked. They must be together, together go down to whatever abyss, rise to whatever incredible heights, lay before them. She was a long time.

To Lady Damaris, Mrs. Murat-Blood seemed only to be gone a moment. She had braced herself a little now, overcome a little the teeth of the gnawing monster of doubt.

" . . . and got the most terrible cold of my life, so I never climbed at all at Cook. Instead we went to Milford Sound. One used to go there by boat, but the sound is uncharted, and one sank. So now one has to walk. Three days there and three back. Not really worth it. So very like the Norwegian fjords. I remember at Christiansund . . ." said Mrs. Dawe, as the door opened and Mrs. Murat-Blood and Miss Jewell came in.

Lady Damaris looked up, calm and ashen, and

Mr. Roxborough brought up another chair, closing the circle.

"Sit down, Cecily," said Lady Damaris. Mr. Charlecote felt the atmosphere of the room change, as though the perfecting of the circle had loosed strange forces. It was as though the volcanoes that had lain always dormant in them all were sending up little warning jets of steam. Mrs. Dawe shivered a little. To Miss Jewell it looked as though they were going to play some absurd parlour-game; hunt the slipper, she said to herself, her thoughts still flippant and carefree.

"I must tell you first, Cecily," said Lady Damaris, "that your cousin Athaliah is dead. She was struck by lightning on the roof of the tower. You will understand that we are all rather shaken."

"Indeed, yes," faltered Miss Jewell. "I'm so dreadfully sorry . . ."

"She would have wished to die so," said Lady Cleone, from some immeasurable distance.

"Yes," breathed the princess, who still stood by the fireplace. Upright and vital above them all, she seemed to impose herself on the room like a light. "Struck from the air at the crisis of the storm, in her moment of . . ."

"Please, Athénée," said Lady Damaris, "not

again." Her voice had the dry crackle of trodden autumn twigs.

"The princess is so poetic," whispered Mrs. Dawe to Mr. Roxborough. The sound of her own voice restored to her a sense of her own reality.

"The wrath of the gods," said Miss Vulliamy, her voice charged with meaning.

"The wrath of God," amended Lady Bernice, and crossed herself.

"Lady Athaliah had an image of the tallest cedar stamped on her shoulder," said Sir Lothar to Miss Jewell. His voice was formal, almost hostile in its indifference, as though he were untouched, apart, asbestos in the fire of the common tension. Miss Jewell answered nothing. She could not really believe that Lady Athaliah was dead. She had been such a vital person. Was it really only that afternoon that she had fetched those German periodicals from the hall for her? What was it Alexis had called her? The witch. And now the witch was dead. She longed strangely to see her, to touch the cold clay of her face, to know whether her bright, heavy eyes were glazed as with aspic, to be sure she was really dead.

"And now," said Lady Damaris, "Athénée tells us about you and Mr. Charlecote. You must realise . . ."

Miss Jewell suddenly began to cry, weakly and without wanting to. She did not in the least feel like crying. She looked up to see Mrs. Dawe on her knees before her, comforting, mock-maternal.

"Don't . . . don't . . . it's only physical . . . not me at all," she faltered through the sobs, that shook her like a wind.

She did not in the least want to be patted and petted by Mrs. Dawe, and told that, of course, her nerves were overwrought, but that Mrs. Dawe understood. Just when she had found her independence, and knew her courage. She shook Mrs. Dawe off, and stared at Lady Damaris, the tears running unregarded down her thin, shining face.

Mr. Charlecote ran across to her.

"Dympna, dear Dympna," he cried. "Don't. Don't cry. We must make them believe that it's all right. That we haven't done anything . . . anything like that."

Even Alexis had seen only her tears, thought Miss Jewell; he had taken the body for the spirit, the shadow for the substance. They all did that, missing the substance. She wondered with a chill of fear whether all along he had seen only her body, whether in reality her spirit were still alone in its remote, inaccessible temple.

"Oh, indeed, I'm sure I never . . ." began Mrs. Dawe.

"Of course not, of course not," said Mrs. Murat-Blood and Mr. Roxborough simultaneously. Mrs. Murat-Blood poured her words out gently, slowly, as soothing oil from a jar.

The princess, alone above the circle, smiled to herself.

"You can hardly expect us to believe that," said Miss Vulliamy, intent on revenge. She felt hatred within her like a strong tree. She clasped her arms about the stem of her hatred, and was glad.

Miss Jewell, among her tears, laughed.

"What does it matter what they believe, Alexis? I don't care. They're trying to make us ashamed. And I'm not ashamed. I'm glad. Don't be ashamed, Alexis."

"Elle a le naturel d'une grue," muttered Miss Vulliamy to herself. "C'est rigolo."

"That's right," said the princess, exultant. "The only way not to do what you are ashamed of is not to be ashamed of what you do."

"Dympna!" Mr. Charlecote could hardly believe what he heard. Was this the Dympna whom he had found that afternoon arranging Lady Cleone's cards for that abominable game? Whom he had told to put on a little colour?

"Oh, Cecilia," wailed Lady Bernice, "how can you expect us to go on believing in you?"

"I don't. I don't," cried Miss Jewell. "I think it's perfectly horrible to be believed in."

The princess turned and stretched out her round, white arms to Miss Jewell.

"Oh, magnificent!" she cried, and her voice was resonant as a drum, and tender as a leaf. "Don't give in. Defy them. Don't let them bully you. En avant, take your life into your own hands. Show them what you're made of. I envy you. I told them I would have done it. And so, if they were honest, would they. D'you know what was in Athalie's tower? All sorts of extremely silly indecencies. Frescoes and books and photographs. A galimatias of futilities. It's a pity she never took me into her confidence. I could have given her better ideas than that. Poor, starved Athalie! They won't believe me when I tell them it's because she never went into the garden on a mad summer night. But it's true. And Bérénice and her religion. It's all the same. . . ."

"Oh, Athénée," protested Lady Bernice, "don't."

The princess swung round upon her. To Mr. Charlecote she seemed to be transfigured, to have grown taller, to be splendid rather than extravagant, more brilliant than flashy.

"It is true, Bérénice. You should have taken the veil all those years ago, when you thought you had a vocation, when you said you felt yourself destined indeed to be the bride of Christ. Oh, you fools, you're sex-ridden, warped. But, above all, stupid and pitiable in your inhibitions. You're perverted, if you like, because you've killed yourselves. Because you didn't know that only in submission to yourself is there victory."

Mr. Roxborough waved his monocle in the air with his right hand.

"No," he said, "no. A manifestation of deliberate will is the final flower of life. It is beautiful that man should control all things, and at last himself. To witness a victory of restraint is to experience a sensation subtle, quiet, perfect a thousand times. Licence is a violation of the will."

He had not been offended at the princess's remarks, because they did not seem to apply to him, who only watched and considered and weighed; who was the eternal audience. But restraint was something that he loved as a living thing.

"Violation?" said the princess, laughing. "Everything must be violated. Nothing is conscious until it is violated."

"You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs," twittered Mrs. Dawe, more to reassure herself

than to make any contribution to the talk. All her emotions were very nebulous and vague ; she herself felt thin and insubstantial.

“ Please, Athénée.” Lady Damaris’s voice cut across the others’, thin and sharp. “ I think that is enough. You may remember, we were discussing Cecily and Mr. Charlecote. I think we may leave out Athaliah and Bernice.”

“ Perhaps it would be better if you talked to them alone, Lady Damaris,” offered Mrs. Murat-Blood. There was a luminous softness in her face, as if she were tired and tolerant at once.

“ Why ? ” cried Miss Jewell. “ Why ? Oh, let’s have things clear and simple and out in the air for once. We can’t be shut away in little separate boxes all the time.”

“ Leave out Athalie and Bérénice ? ” said the princess. “ Oh, but, dear Damaris, don’t you see we can’t ? We can’t leave anyone out. We’re all driven by this same force of life. You’ve got to calculate on that. Or, rather, not calculate ; but when it does burst out, bow down before it. Personally, I think it’s a good thing that sometimes it comes like a great wind to sweep the cobwebs from us. But, whether you like it or not, whether you fight it or not, it’s there, threatening, always, always.”

Lady Damaris’s eyes caught Mr. Charlecote’s for

an instant. She saw flying in them some banner of admiration, and was gladdened by the sight. Mr. Charlecote felt that, if only she would exert it, Lady Damaris possessed enough authority to control them all. But suddenly, as she was about to speak, Miss Vulliamy rose to her feet. Like a witness making a deposition, thought Mr. Charlecote. She seemed to look far beyond the massive fireplace, on which her eyes were fixed.

Hatred was now a shining weapon in her hands. It must be used ; it must inflict wounds ; it must demolish something. But they had all, in some subtle way, been attacking her. Strangely their words had pierced her like darts, like flames. But something must be done with this sombre hatred. Like the scorpion, ringed with the fires of their attack, she turned the sting against her own breast.

"It's true," she said, with a steadiness of so delicate a poise that, it seemed, anything might shatter it. "It's true. And I'm afraid of it. We're all afraid of it. And I, especially. I'm afraid of becoming like Lady Athaliah. Or Lady Bernice. I don't want to be wasted. I want to use myself, use my body and my mind and my nerves, for my own pleasure, for the pleasure of another. . . ."

She broke off for a moment, and looked wildly round the room.

"What, what is hunting you?" cried Miss Jewell.

Then, with a little gasp, Miss Vulliamy went on.

"I don't know what's making me say it. I can't help it somehow. I . . . I've always been proud that I didn't confide in people. I've always been self-sufficient. And so I can't yield. The princess says nothing is conscious until it is violated. But that's not true. It can be so conscious that it guards against violation, yet wants to be on the other side of violation."

All the hatred was dead in her now. The dark tide of it had ebbed away, leaving her cold and tuned to too high a pitch, but with no retreat.

"I know I'm all wrong, but I can't help myself. I don't . . . attract anybody. I only arouse that little reflection of desire that is born of my own. Just the heat of something that is near a flame, that dies and is cold again when the flame is not physically near. Men have desired me like that, just for a moment. There have been other emotions, too, but they don't do, they don't do."

"No, no, quite," said the general, who felt that this should be stopped, but had no idea what to say. He felt uncomfortable, conscious of every fold of his clothes and every crackle of his starched shirt.

Miss Vulliamy flung up her head and looked the

princess in the eyes. Like anyone in the grip of an emotion, she looked for once young ; like an angry child. But she was not angry any more, only intent in not giving herself away, or pretending she had not given herself away. Mr. Charlecote, seeing her all too clearly, felt sorry for her ; he rather enjoyed feeling sorry for people.

“ There,” she cried, “ now you have it. I can’t risk things. There is so much I want, and I can’t risk anything. Now Mr. Charlecote can tell you how jealous I am. . . .”

Mrs. Murat-Blood looked at Mr. Charlecote questioningly.

“ And what have you two been doing ? ” asked the princess, gracious, really interested.

“ Good Lord ! ” exclaimed the general, and Mrs. Dawe coughed over the suppression of a titter.

“ Miss Vulliamy . . . ” protested Mr. Charlecote. He wished she had not said that ; he felt even more sorry for her. He would have spared her. But Miss Vulliamy was not going to give him the chance of generosity. She had won on that.

“ God knows why I’ve said all that.” Miss Vulliamy’s voice sounded perilously near to breaking, like the agonised squeak of a rope as its last strands fray apart. “ There’s something in this damnable room.”

She sat down on the edge of her big, soft chair and blinked rapidly. Her mind was still contracted with the effort of keeping on, keeping on, although she could not go back. She felt drained of strength, but freer ; in some perverse way, stronger.

"Pelican Chain," thought Mrs. Daw wildly ; dear Alberich had been right. He had always said it was the product of a mind diseased. But she was right ; there was something in the room. She supposed that it was the shock of the revelations about Lady Athaliah that had made everyone so—well, abnormal. The princess stared at Miss Vulliamy, and smiled.

"Puppet," said the princess, and wondered whether she had given the strings that little jerk she had promised herself. She decided that she had.

Something stirred in Mrs. Dawe's brain, and she heard herself speak.

"Yes, it's true, I know," she said, "but you needn't be afraid, Miss Vulliamy. You see, my chest was weak . . ."

She paused, and glanced at Lady Damaris, as if appealing to her to check a torrent that was beyond her own control, to reinforce the shattered sluices. Then she went on, in her thin, twittering voice.

"I had to go to Switzerland. That's all over long ago, of course. Fifteen years. It was just two years

after I married. But my husband refused to live with me again. He said it wasn't safe. . . . That wasn't it really, of course. Alberich had other . . . other women. I used to see him meet them sometimes at the end of the road, watching from the window. Our bedroom had a window at the side which looked all up the road. It was the only room in the house that had. I used to see him meet one in particular. She lived just round the corner. I knew her quite well by sight. Rather a pretty woman, a blonde cendrée. But dull, no stamina. It had been going on for years—the others, I mean—when he met her. That was two and a half years ago.”

Mr. Charlecote remembered two women he had seen with the late Mr. Dawe at a first night ; the one dark, with an Eton crop, in a dinner-jacket and black skirt ; the other, short, plump, a blonde cendrée. Mrs. Dawe had a curiously rootless look, as though she belonged nowhere, as she went on talking.

“Alberich used to say he couldn't sleep at night, so as to excuse the noise he made coming in after he'd been with her. He was thorough. He kept some veronal tablets on the table by his bed. That may have convinced the servants, but I knew, and he knew it. But I didn't say anything. It made it just possible for us to go on living in the same house.

And then one day he brought her mother to call. A silly, harmless old woman. But I daresay she knew. And then he invited them both to dinner. Why, I can't imagine. And I had to take her up to my room, and put her coat . . . it was grey squirrel, I remember ; Alberich was never mean . . . down on my bed, and let her use my powder. I think that was what did it. We went out to a first night afterwards, and Alberich saw her home. He used to drink some patent food . . . Glaxovo, or something . . . the last thing every night, and the kettle was left simmering in his bedroom. No one ever seemed to guess that I had put all the veronal into it. It was very strange. . . .”

Mrs. Dawe's voice died away in the still room. Mrs. Dawe remained still for a little, too ; then suddenly she put her hands to her head and gave a little scream. She was convulsed with an agony of dread of what she had said. What was it exactly ? Her mind was suddenly a chaos, a dark pit of doubting and regret and mistrust.

“ Oh, whatever have I said ? ” she cried. “ What have I said ? ”

The princess laid a firm hand on her shaking shoulder.

“ Don't worry, Mrs. Dawe,” she said. “ It doesn't matter. It will do you good now you've said it. It

would do us all good to speak the truth for once. We must all do it now, and then none of us can tell tales out of school. Just for this once, and get off our minds all the soiled things, the dead, the mean, the ignoble. And to-morrow the evening will be as if it had never been."

Lady Damaris was not so straight in her chair now ; she sat almost crumpled against its tall back. She looked beaten, broken, small, and powerless as she sat there. Her world was destroyed about her. It was terrible to her that Mrs. Dawe should have said those things in her drawing-room. It was not so terrible that Mrs. Dawe had killed her husband. Mrs. Dawe was not real enough to Lady Damaris for that to matter. But it was a horror that the compact, neat little story, dreary and squalid and worn as it was, should have been recited in Mrs. Dawe's precise, twittering voice, there in the drawing-room of Pagnell Bois. Mr. Charlecote, looking at her, wanted to do something to help her, but he too was powerless. The princess led them now.

Mr. Roxborough swung his monocle idly on the end of its ribbon. He too was at a loss.

"Ah," said Mrs. Murat-Blood, "if only we could. Get rid of the dead, mean things. But they're there all the time."

FROLIC WIND

Suddenly her manner stiffened, and her voice, that had been soft and full, took on its platform diction, stiff, blank, yet urgent.

“Why don’t we die when our hearts break? Why don’t we ever die? If death is the consummation, why doesn’t it fall swiftly, relentlessly, at the high point? My husband and both my sons were killed in the war. Joe was killed three weeks before his twentieth birthday. He had a commission. Joachim, my husband, got it for him. He was in the regular army. And Charles wouldn’t go at first. Then he was a conscript. In the ranks. They court-martialled him and shot him, because he’d fallen asleep. After four days in the trenches. Just nineteen. Oh, yes, I found out. Killed in France, they told me. And Joachim said it was war, discipline. War. Terrible and right. He said they shot the first Joachim, too, against a wall in Italy. What was that to me?”

She hesitated for a minute. Nobody moved or said anything, but Mr. Roxborough’s monocle fell against the arm of his chair and broke. The little shining fragments of the lens winked back at him from the carpet.

“And then Joachim was killed, too. At Ypres. They wanted me to go and see the unveiling of the Menin Gate. To take some of the women from my

clubs. But I couldn't. I didn't care about Joachim, somehow. He hurt me without meaning to, without knowing he'd done it. You can't forgive that. He loved discipline more than Charles. . . . I thought everything was over then. For a little. But it wasn't. You can't check that force that is in you, that keeps you alive, that accursed urge. There were emotions in me that would not be stilled. While all the rest lay dead. Like a corpse that still lusted. . . . So I turned to my work, and made the lustful force work for me. I haven't said this to anyone. I have been so busy. . . ."

"Sublimation," said Mr. Roxborough, finding a stray cue at last.

"Very terrible for you, Mrs. Murat-Blood, very terrible," said the general pompously. "But you should remember that, in a sense, Charles died for England no less than your husband and your other son."

"Oh, dear, what can she care about that, poor thing?" said Mrs. Dawe. She felt better now, as though she had indeed been released. She did not remember very clearly what she had said. It was as if for a few minutes she had been translated to another plane, to another dimension, where she was not responsible for her actions.

"Like the general's Gippoes," said Sir Lothar, deeply booming.

He had been long silent—rather bored, indeed. He felt that this had nothing to do with him. There was an air of Shavian theatricality which destroyed for him all likeness to reality.

The general turned crimson. He was filled with revulsion from Sir Lothar, and Mrs. Murat-Blood, and Miss Vulliamy. Mrs. Dawe only he found sympathy for. Her he could understand.

“I can’t allow any discussion of that,” he said. “The whole matter has been thrashed out in public. I was censured. There the affair ends.”

“Why shouldn’t we mention it?” asked Miss Vulliamy. “We’re all speaking the truth. Now I’ve got my share of it over, I must say it is rather fun. Tell us your version of it.”

Mr. Roxborough considered Miss Vulliamy’s choice of words infelicitous. The whole conversation was so raw, so naked, it offended him like an evil smell. Miss Vulliamy looked at the tight, shut-up little general. She thought his mind was like a snail that had died from being shut up in its shell, and now was dried and small.

“Certainly not,” cried the general. “All speaking the truth, indeed. It’s indecent. Behaving like this after blaming poor little Miss Jewell here and young Charlecote for bathing naked in the pond! Upon my soul, they’re the most decent of the lot. This

whole conversation is an offence. Lady Damaris, can't you do something? Lady Bernice?"

"Don't call me poor little Miss Jewell. I'm proud and happy. And let them go on if they want to. It doesn't hurt us," cried Miss Jewell, and then laughed at the sight of the general's surprised face.

Lady Damaris shook her head slowly from side to side. She was very tired. She remembered that she was eighty.

"Please, please, I beg you . . ." began Lady Bernice.

"We are offending our hostesses," said Mr. Roxborough, in an endeavour to assert himself. "I think we have forgotten that. They will, I know, be ready to excuse us if we have hurt them. But if this 'truth' is incompatible with good taste, might we not adjourn . . . ?"

"Good taste!" interrupted the princess. "Good taste is extremely desirable. So are clothes. But we have to take them off now and again to have a bath."

"Rubbish," said the general. "You don't bath in the drawing-room."

Mr. Roxborough had regained his self-possession now, but there was no checking the princess.

"Let us go on speaking the truth. It's wonderful. Like a sharp fire, a powerful cautery. Listen. I'll tell you something. I was married when I was

seventeen. My mother was jealous of me. With, I hope, reason. I was beautiful. My husband and I didn't care a jot for one another. I, you see, was an heiress. Fortunately for me, our marriage was never consummated. He was too occupied elsewhere. I still pay no fewer than five monthly pensions. That was almost his sole legacy to me. He died in agony two years after our marriage. Raving. He'd been a fool, of course. Wouldn't admit it until it was too late. Any doctor will tell you that's how half the trouble is caused. I saw him die. But I'm of different stuff from Mrs. Dawe, and Mrs. Murat-Blood, and Miss Vulliamy. I thought I should go mad. But then I laughed. I learned to console myself. You see, they told me that unless I underwent an operation I couldn't bear children. I wouldn't have it performed."

"Good God!" exclaimed the general.

"And I have not been bored, nor depressed, nor thwarted. I have been free!"

"I can't bear it! I can't bear it!" whined Lady Bernice. "I know something worse will come out."

"Worse?" said the general, in an odd, strained, barking voice. "D'you mean to say you can imagine anything worse than what we've been told already? Awful!"

Sir Lothar boomed :

“ You were wrong, princess. Women are made to bear children. You might have been happy.”

“ Happy ? ” the princess shrugged her shoulders. It gave her pleasure that, even in her inmost heart, she could shrug the idea of happiness to scorn. “ Sir Lothar, you wouldn’t have kissed the happy mother of an extensive if slightly left-handed family in the rose-garden to-night.”

“ Who hadn’t had her face lifted,” added Miss Vulliamy, seizing the last branch of the withered tree of hatred.

“ Face lifted ? ” said Sir Lothar.

“ Well, she has,” she replied.

The princess smiled.

“ Certainly,” she said ; “ it is usually accounted a most successful operation.”

“ Oh, whatever has been going on in the garden to-night ? ” cried Lady Bernice.

“ Whatever hasn’t ? ” said the general fiercely.

“ No,” said Sir Lothar, “ no, princess. I wouldn’t. I can’t think why I did in any case.” He stopped and puffed at his cigarette. “ I couldn’t tell you the real reason why I did if I tried. But, as for the rest of the truth . . . I’m a damned Jew. I’m a damned rich Jew. I determined to make a name for myself. Anyone will know a Jew for his money, but I wanted

them to know me for something else. I dug up bits of civilisations as enthusiastic as ours, as hopeful as ours, over half the world. I had my reward. I was honoured. It is fashionable for Jews to accept every possible honour from Gentiles, while taking great care to confer none in return. That is very Jewish."

"Nothing you have earned is worth having," put in Mr. Charlecote. "Only the unmerited is beautiful."

Miss Jewell cast him an upward, questioning glance. There was in her a great gladness that they were behaving so queerly. It gave a childish sensation that among so much error her own small peccadilloes were reduced by contrast to infinitesimal proportions. And, too, she felt a violent, profound joy, that ran like a fountain through her body and her limbs, that from these ashes she and Alexis would rise, like the fabled bird, out and into the clean, sweet, gentle world that was theirs. The fountain of her joy ran so strong within her that she could have laughed. She did not want to interrupt the others. She was content to sit there, quiet and glad, beside Alexis, and wait until the moment should come when they must go. For they must go, and the moment must come, unmistakable, which was their cue to go. She had a strange instinct that the others in the room were only actors, only the personages in a

scene which was provided as a frame, a great contrast, for Alexis and herself ; that they were remote, and no longer affected her, save as a show.

"Dead Sea fruit," murmured Mr. Roxborough, pat as ever, and feeling ground beneath his feet.

"Yes," said Sir Lothar. "Here I am at Pagnell Bois. That was a leaf of the laurel crown I set out to win." His smile disposed of Pagnell Bois. "And my sweat and laurel crowns ? Just rubbish on the road, for someone else to dig up."

"Less than the dust," said Mr. Roxborough. Blatant platitude restored things, somehow, to the norm.

"Yes, Mr. Roxborough, less than the dust," said Sir Lothar rather vindictively, "like your trinkets and your Sèvres snuff-boxes and your famille verte and your monocle. One day someone will dig them up, poor blighter."

"But we must have them," said Mrs. Dawe. "Life would be intolerable otherwise."

"Like children at the end of childhood," said Mr. Charlecote, "who realise the futility of their toys, but yet must play with them a little."

A part of him was longing with a great urgency to be gone, away from this cackling crowd, out into the night, with Dympna ; but another part was insistent that he should stay, to watch, to observe

these strange shadow-folk at their game. He remained polarised, delicately balanced.

“To conclude,” said Sir Lothar firmly. “I expect you have all heard stories about me. Well, they are true.”

“Thank you, Sir Lothar. I am doubly complimented,” said the princess, and swept him a mocking courtesy.

“This is appalling,” said the general, who heard everything at his club. “I don’t know whether I’m on my head or my heels. Lady Damaris, can’t you do anything?”

Lady Damaris raised her sunken head. Somehow she was insignificant; the Lady Damaris Mocque-Stallyon, insignificant.

“I can’t do anything, general. It has got beyond me. This is something I don’t know. That I have never wished to know. I am so very sorry about it.”

“Poor Damaris,” said the princess. “No, you’ve never wanted to know it. You’ve just hidden behind the rampart of the name of Jeune. All your life. No wonder poor Sir Beauvoir was driven to drink.”

Lady Damaris looked up at her, and flashed her old, dark eyes.

“I suppose I am surprised at that, Athénée. Although I did not expect to be spared. Yes, certainly, I knew that. But it has never seemed to

me that it needed to be said. I was brought up to believe that the most important thing in life was to know how to ignore things. I have ignored so much."

The gleam died out of her eyes, and out of her altogether, leaving her cold and empty as the little temple in the garden. Not unbeautiful, but just something that was no more use, and no man's care, desert.

"Yes, yes," said the general, "I suppose you have."

Then his worn, rasping voice rose in exasperation.

"I think it's damnable! You've all of you lost your heads. Every man jack of you, except Roxborough there."

Mr. Roxborough waved his thin hand.

"No, I haven't lost my head. But I'm not with you, Tresmand. I wonder if perhaps there is not some balm in this confession. What has made us all talk like this? Does it matter? Perhaps it is because something has happened, something strange and not quite mortal. Poor Lady Athaliah."

"I can't bear it," wailed Lady Bernice, returning suddenly from some remote spot where she had been communing with herself. "Promise you won't say anything, Damaris. Oh, poor Cecilia!"

Mr. Roxborough continued to speak, precisely as ever.

"I had always determined to enjoy my life," he said, "and I have enjoyed it."

"You seem to have done a lot better than most people here," growled the general.

"Everything as it came, and while it lasted, I have enjoyed. Not passionately, but delicately, savouring it. But when I look back, my life is empty. That is supposed to be a sign of happiness. Perhaps so. Even the war I managed to put on one side, persuading myself that it was a thing outside myself, that had not really touched me."

"I thought you served," said the general. "Stebbing was telling me only to-day . . ."

"I am coming to that. At the beginning of the war I thought it would be a little thing, remote as the Boer War had been. And then, when it grew and grew and seemed interminable, I felt I must do something. I had an idea it would bring peace. I suppose we all thought that. That perhaps it was a righteous war. Not a crusade against Germany; I don't mean that. But that perhaps it was a blood-letting for an Europe grown great and swollen beyond measure. I got a commission, and then, as my part in Europe's cure, as my brick in the edifice of peace, I was sent to Boulogne. There, for the most part, I sat on courts-martial."

He broke off. Mrs. Murat-Blood's white face

seemed to stand out from the others like a beacon. From the mists of her mind, Lady Cleone spoke :

“ Perhaps it was you who . . . ”

“ Stop ! ” cried Mrs. Murat-Blood, wielding the word like a sword. “ For God’s sake, stop ! ”

For an instant everything was still but for the general’s noticeable breathing. Then Mrs. Dawe gave a little sob.

“ Oh, can’t we stop this dreadful game ? ” she faltered. “ Princess, you started it. Stop it, oh ! please stop it. ”

The princess smiled, flamboyant, triumphant.

“ No. Let us go on. Let it scorch you, grime you. At the end you will be purified, at peace. ”

“ Damned ashamed of ourselves, more like, ” said the general. “ Why, we’ve heard more scandal this evening than I’ve ever heard in my life. ” He could not exclude a slight intonation of pleasure from his voice. Then it reverted to its pristine disgust. “ Pure, indeed ! ”

“ I can’t bear it, ” cried Lady Bernice again. “ It’s no good, Damaris. Don’t try to stop me. I shall have to tell them. Cleone, you deserve it for what you said just now. ”

“ Come, Bérénice, tell us, tell us ! ” The princess’s voice had almost a laugh in it. Her black eyes shone.

Lady Bernice paused for a moment, making a
Sw

stupendous effort to regain control of herself. Then she began to speak, quickly, in a low voice, that was no more than an echo of her own.

"It's about Cecilia. That's why I wasn't really surprised at what happened this evening. Although I was shocked. It's in the blood. Don't blame me, Cleone. I can't help it. . . . Cecilia is Cleone's daughter. . . . Oh, forgive me, forgive me, I oughtn't to have said it."

There was a little pause, crystal-clear, while everyone's brain did sums with dates, and cast about for scraps of remembered gossip.

Then :

"Oh, oh, oh!" laughed the princess. "This is superb. Cleone's daughter. I never thought it of you, Cleone. I congratulate you. It is marvellous."

"Good God!" said the general, and then very hurriedly: "I think you're all stark, staring mad. . . . I . . . I simply don't know where I am. I won't stay in this room another minute."

He got up and went over to the door, but he did not leave the room.

Mrs. Dawe gazed wide-eyed at Lady Cleone, as though she were trying to make herself believe that that old, shrivelled, pallid woman, with her yellow teeth and her strange, flippant, trivial eyes, had ever found a man who had asked for her, and coveted

her body, and taken it, and given her a child ; that pathetic Lady Cleone had ever been a woman.

Mrs. Murat-Blood's eyes, too, dim now and shrouded, turned slowly towards the little, white-haired woman, who looked round at them all with a vapid, pleased smile.

Miss Jewell stared and stared at Lady Cleone ; then all at once she laughed.

" But she's m a d ! " she cried. " Mad ! "

" Oh, no, dear," put in Mrs. Dawe, " only a little odd."

Miss Jewell sprang to her feet, her arms stiff, her fingers crisped into her palms. Now all her bright, tender joy fell from her like a stolen mantle, like a refreshing rain or frolicking wind that has passed, leaving her stripped and sick, dark, dark in her heart. In that moment she could not connect herself with Lady Cleone. She tried to force herself to realise it. Lady Cleone had conceived her, she thought ; beneath her heart she had lain and been formed ; from her womb she had come forth. The thought was enormous and black and disastrous. And Lady Cleone was mad. And Lady Cleone was her mother.

" Isn't there anyone in the room whose appearance is the truth ? " she cried with her lips, while

her heart worked its own dark problem. "Isn't there anyone who's real?"

"Yes," said the general, "me."

"Miss Vulliamy's afraid she's going to be like Lady Athaliah . . . Mrs. Murat-Blood . . . oh, poor Mrs. Murat-Blood ! . . . Mrs. Dawe's a murderess . . ."

Mrs. Dawe sucked her breath loudly in between her teeth.

"I say, I say," urged the general.

"Miss Jewell ! Miss Jewell !" muttered Sir Lothar, but she took no notice.

". . . Mr. Roxborough had Mrs. Murat-Blood's son shot . . ."

"Dympna, Dympna, don't !" cried Mr. Charlecote. "Dympna darling !"

She shook off his restraining hand.

"Not for my sake, Miss Jewell, but . . ." began Mr. Roxborough, gallant still.

"It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter," said Mrs. Murat-Blood hopelessly.

"After all, we don't know for certain," said Mrs. Dawe.

"No, no, I won't stop. Sir Lothar's just what Miss Vulliamy said . . . the princess is a trull . . . Lady Athaliah was simply a silly, sex-mad old maid . . ."

"Hush, Dympna."

"She's lying dead in the house," said Sir Lothar.

"De mortuis," shouted the general, outraged.

"Nonsense," said the princess to him tartly.

"... Lady Damaris has suddenly become nothing, nothing . . . Lady Bernice . . . oh, yes, the princess has told us about you, Lady Bernice—Aunt Bernice, I should say—and I, I am the bastard of a mad-woman . . ."

"Oh, not mad, Cecilia, not mad. Deranged. Poor Cleone." Lady Bernice gripped her golden crucifix so hard that the branch of the cross snapped, but she did not seem to notice.

"She is my daughter," said Lady Cleone cheerfully. She got up, and danced a few steps, her thin arms waving. "Mike and I. Oh ! Mike and I . . ." she chanted.

"The proud Jeunes," said Mr. Roxborough, as one who had never seen a more resplendent majesty, a mellower decline, a steeper fall.

"It is quite true," said Lady Damaris, in her wearied voice. There was no use in struggling further. "Cleone fell in love with a groom of ours. An Irishman called Michael O'Flannigan."

"O'Flannigan !" wailed Miss Jewell.

"Cleone and he used to meet down in the little temple, beyond the alley, and in an old arbour

where roses and clematis grew. He used to make her garlands of them . . .”

“Desecrate, everything desecrate,” cried Miss Jewell. It hurt her like a sword-thrust that there, where she and Alexis had sat, where she had relaxed into his arms, given her body to the strong hands that had bruised it, where he had kissed her and talked his nonsense to her, Lady Cleone, her mother, had met and loved Michael O’Flannigan, the groom, her father. Perhaps there, too, Lady Cleone had traced with a questing finger the line of the groom’s eyebrows, and twined the tendrils of his hair, as she had touched Alexis. Their flesh had thrilled there too, among the roses and the clematis, and he had woven for her garlands that smelled as sweet as any of syringa. It was intolerable to her to imagine it, to look from her imaginings to the old woman before her. Unwilling, she conjured up picture after picture, lived over again her ecstasy and ardour with Alexis, crediting the madwoman and her lover just such dark joys, just such blind fervour. Her mind and body were convulsed with horror and disgust. She could have fainted with it. She could not faint. She sat still in her chair beside Alexis and watched one bright image after another smirched and torn down from its place in her treasury as she compared it with its predecessor. All the flowers

were turned to nettles, all the garlands of flowers were snakes that stung her breast, everything that she had named sacred, sweet, quiet, was evil, sour, lambent with corruption. Lady Cleone and herself, Michael and Alexis. Michael's head pressed on Cleone's soft breasts, as Alexis's on hers. Cleone's hands, that felt the taut muscles of Michael's back, as she had felt Alexis's. All that had been beautiful was now only a distorted image of beauty ; all that had been sensual was now sensuous, deadened with the needless repetition of it all, the mockery of echo, the very leer of life. She was nauseated, overset, capsized. She laid her head in her hands.

"Alas, our fairyland !" said Mr. Charlecote. He put his arm round Miss Jewell, but she gave him no response.

She raised her face, twisted with broken laughter.

"And I," she said, "you called me an elf, Alexis. And I, I was conceived in that fairyland. . . . Oh, magic !"

"It was after our father's death, of course," went on Lady Damaris. "Cleone was over forty at the time. Dear me, Cecily, I had not realised you were as much as twenty-eight. Cleone went away to Italy for your birth. It was she who gave you that odd name Mr. Charlecote calls you by."

Somehow Miss Jewell had not thought of Lady

Cleone as having been forty, there, down in the harbour. There was a new smirch on the holy places. The groom and the lovesick woman of forty. It turned her stomach, it turned her soul.

"Of course, we dismissed the groom, and saw that he went out to Canada. There was never any scandal. We wouldn't tell Cleone where he was. Then something seemed to give way in her brain. She has never been the same again."

"The cruelty, the awful cruelty," said the princess. "Poor, poor Cleone!"

"We acted for the best," said Lady Damaris. "We said Cecily was the orphan of a cousin."

"My jewel," sang Lady Cleone.

"We had to avoid a scandal."

"We couldn't afford that, of course. Damaris was quite right," said Lady Bernice. "We had to think of the name."

Gradually Miss Jewell's feeling of nausea passed. There flamed up in her a fire of anger, of active, irresistible fury. Who were they that they should break her holy pictures? She would slough off this old entangling cloak, and go out naked into the world with Alexis. They would start again, away from here, away from the memories of dead loves and madness, giving in exchange for freedom their fairyland. She threw up her head, her pale, silvery

eyes blazing, defiant, her lips parted, young and terrible.

"No, you couldn't have a scandal. Of course not," she said swiftly, rather hysterically, as though she were following the thread of her thoughts aloud, and had no idea to what minotaur that thread might not lead her. "And I, the bastard of a groom and a madwoman. Of course, everything must be sacrificed to the name of Jeune, to the name of Pagnell Bois. . . . What was that old god who had two faces?"

"Janus," offered Mr. Roxborough. "The doors of his temple were closed in time of peace, and . . ."

Miss Jewell waved his attempted eloquence aside.

"Janus. That is it. This house is a very temple of Janus. All of you double-faced."

Naturally, she was muddling, thought Mr. Roxborough, a trifle piqued at being so easily thrust aside.

"Alexis, oh, Alexis, tell me quickly, while I can bear it. What is your other face? Are you unreal, too?"

Mr. Charlecote was on his knees beside her, looking up into her face with those little puckers in his brow that so disturbed Miss Vulliamy. Now again she longed to smooth them out for him.

"No, no, Dymrna dear. I'm real. Please believe

that. I'm real, and I want you, Dympna. I love you. I love you."

"Dare I believe you?" asked Miss Jewell. To Sir Lothar, she seemed to be some wild thing that sat there in the shape of Cecilia Jewell. Above her pale face her red hair was aflame.

"Dare I? Or shall I be let down?"

"I won't let you down, Dympna. I swear it."

"Of course you'll be let down," said Mrs. Murat-Blood. "We all are."

"Yes, but it's worth it." The princess's voice, deep as an organ, full as the tongue of hounds, rang out. "It's worth it over and over again."

"Nothing is worth it—nothing," boomed Sir Lothar. His remark was addressed mainly to the princess.

"Whatever are you talking about, all of you?" said the general, coming back into the centre of the room. "You don't keep to the point at all. Lady Damaris has told Miss Jewell that she is—er—Lady Cleone's daughter. I'm sure we shan't any of us mention it. What is all this talk about being let down? You don't take things seriously. I can't understand it . . ."

His voice petered out peevishly, and he looked doubtfully round the room.

"Don't take any notice of them, dear," said

Mr. Charlecote. "They're all mad—mad, I tell you. Not gloriously mad, like we were to-night. But filthy mad. Gangrene in their souls. They're not real at all, you know ; you said they're not real. Only you and I are real here, Dympna. They don't believe in anything. If you don't believe that anything is real, you can't be real yourself."

"Yes," said Miss Jewell, and her voice sounded rounder again, more natural. "Of all the truths we've had to-night, that's the only one that's sound and wholesome. Yes, we're real. I believe that. I believe there are things in the world that are honest and beautiful and strong . . ."

"Sounds like the creed," said Mrs. Dawe faintly.

Miss Jewell faced the room, and spoke loud and clear. Her heavy, red hair was an aureole, thought Mr. Charlecote ; a strange contrast, almost terrible, to those lovely grey eyes, considered Sir Lothar.

"And you, you're all unreal, all of you. Because your souls are dead. Dead and unburied. So that the stink of their corruption rises from you and stifles one. But we, you and I, Alexis, we are real and healthy and alive."

She turned suddenly and put her hand on Alexis's arm. She looked up at him whimsically, appealingly.

"Now I shall be ashamed of that in the morning," she said.

“Never be ashamed,” said the princess. “Be proud, be proud.”

Mr. Charlecote seized Miss Jewell’s hand, and dragged her to his side. The princess’s voice echoed in his mind, in hidden caves that he did not know were opened. A strange incense arose from the caves and spread its fumes between his brain and his eyes ; great banners of joy and courage that had long been furled streamed in the wind of his thoughts, and were mirrored in his eyes ; forgotten sorrows were transmuted and forged into the armour of happiness.

“Come away with me, Dympna ! Come away now. Don’t let us stay among their corruption any more. Come now, out into the night, that gave us our reality.”

Miss Jewell looked into his eyes, and saw the banners waving. In her mind, too, a reflux of that emotion that had sent them lightfoot through the garden, scratched by the briar and tripped by the periwinkle, drugged with the perfume of the syringa, inspired by the saccharine lilt of the Chocolate Soldier, throbbed again and was renewed. And a new electrical current flowed through her body, cool as water, delicate as fluting, vibrant as thunder, and soft as a dream. She was afire with it, and of all her changing feelings there

remained now, for the moment, only a new and shining strength.

There was something in the way she turned to Mr. Charlecote that made plain to all of them in the room that she would go, that they could not hold her.

Lady Bernice wrung her hands.

"Stop them!" she cried. "They mustn't go!"

The princess's voice, that now for the first time was in tune with their hearts, thrilled in the blood of Miss Jewell and Mr. Charlecote as they stood, hands clasped, by the door.

"Go," she said. "Go while you can. While your ardour lasts. You're doomed. You'll let each other down. But it's worth it. Go."

Mr. Charlecote and Miss Jewell turned with a sudden accord, but in the doorway, on the very threshold, they paused, and looked back again at the room. Mrs. Dawe looked after them dreamily, as through a violet curtain of weariness. It came into Miss Jewell's head that for Mrs. Dawe the loveliest, the last, the perfect thing was sleep. Lady Cleone took no notice; she sat quietly in her big, purple chair, one thin, ivory-yellow hand waving before her. Lady Damaris had buried her face in her hands, her elbows resting on the Empress Josephine's

table. There was pathos ; and yet not pathos, but just a mellow, beautiful, autumn leaf, fallen at last. Mr. Roxborough, with head bowed, stood by Sir Lothar, huge and solemn, in the attitude he affected when preparing his sentences. Now, for the moment, he was nothing, but to-morrow he would again be something, would go on his careful way, an elegant, dark crow. Sir Lothar looked at them, his face wiped clean of expression. But there was the ghost of a smile in his pale, dim eyes. And still, thought Mr. Charlecote, they knew nothing about Sir Lothar, what manner of man he was. No manner of man, perhaps ; just emptiness. Lady Bernice wept silently, making futile, beckoning gestures with her ringed hands. She was like a mechanical toy that is about to run down, but, for a few slow seconds, jerks and wavers and jerks again. Mrs. Murat-Blood looked at them as at two immortals, envious, doubtful. She would always doubt, trying to keep both substance and shadow, fearful of parting with the reality. The princess, her head thrown back, so that the skin beneath her chin was distended, her arm flung out, smiled a royal, radiant smile.

“ Go, blessed fools,” she said. “ Don’t ever be ashamed ! ”

Miss Jewell waved good-bye to the general.

“ Good-bye, general,” she said, “ you’re wrong,

but you're sane. You're alive. You can still enjoy being wrong. Good-bye ! ”

The general started and stiffened as he stood, watching the two with parted lips, and a strange look of being about to follow.

Mr. Charlecote and Miss Jewell went out on to the terrace, into the rain-washed air, that greeted their cheeks as urgently and as softly as kisses, and smelt in their nostrils sweeter than the syringa, that, warm with the breath of the steaming earth and cool with the tears of the sky, assuaged the wounds of their minds and the tiredness of their bodies, like a strange ointment of great and gentle virtue. The stars that rode quietly reflected the light that was in their eyes, and space was a sheltered room, somehow prepared for them, and over their privacy the trees stood sentinel. And those who sat behind them in the big drawing-room, a broken circle of puppets, lit by the faceted chandelier that had come from old Carlton House, were characters in a distant play with a dreary ending, on whom the curtain would presently fall. A painted booth was the great façade of Pagnell Bois, and their way led out far from its sordid mask, tangled and scented with periwinkle and briar and syringa, alive with a song they had forgotten but now remembered, that drew them together by some old centripetal force.

Mr. Charlecote's arm was around Miss Jewell's shoulders, and its firm strength pressed on the old bruises, but anew and afresh, not as in that old tale of Michael and Cleone, so that they were set a-throbbing and perpetually renewed.

They both laughed, softly and carelessly. They were drained of emotion, fresh as two children playing, but conscious of wild, dark passions passed and to come, of wonderful flowers and monstrous nettles that would be about them.

But now, for the moment, they were only young.

"Oh, Alexis," cried Miss Jewell, as they set off down the long white terrace, "whatever will they do when they have to come down in the morning and face each other? Oh, whatever will they do?"

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